**Editors Introduction**

**Negotiating Muslim Identities in Media Contexts**

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The purpose of this special issue is to examine the construction of Muslim identity across a range of media outlets in the United States and Europe. In doing so it addresses forms of cultural racism and anti-immigrant rhetoric in mainstream media sources and also examines attempts by Muslims to respond to these constructions and forge new identities through the production and use of specialist and alternative media. Debates about multiculturalism, integration, immigration, community cohesion and the politics of identity at a time of global uncertainty are central to the discussions presented in this issue and form a major backdrop to the analysis of original data. The issue also features new data from a major research project examining the production and consumption of news about Muslims in the United Kingdom and Germany. Taken together, the issue presents the whole communication cycle of production, representation and consumption of both minority and mainstream media, and provides a comprehensive picture of the ways in which Muslim identities are constructed and consumed in particular contexts.

**The Limits of Hospitality**

The sociopolitical context for the issue can be found in the multiple narratives about ‘Muslimness’ and Islam that have thrived for more than decade against the setting of global (in)security, transnational migration and the re-ordering of structural authority worldwide. As this new world order has unfolded, the discursive construction of the social, political and cultural threat of Islam has spread through political and media discourses in states previously secure in their ontological position. Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis, which asserts that western societies are having difficulties readjusting their worldview to take into account the de-westernization of international relations in a post-Cold War era, originally brought this argument to the fore. In this post-Soviet scene, local and global antagonisms were re-drawn along religious-cultural boundaries: dominant among these were Islam. According to authors such as Said (1997) the purpose of the discursive re-construction of Islam is always to restate the sovereignty of the West against attempts to reinvent the world order in a way that might prioritize non-western systems of thought. In this regard we can see how Islam is both perceived and portrayed as a challenge to neoliberal democracy. The modern project of neoliberalism advocates universalizing western forms democracy that are then set against alternative social, political and religious beliefs and practices, which are re-ordered as *un*-democratic. As detailed in this special issue, this system of representation is found in news media across Europe and North America, where narratives of Islam are presented in new binary terms of tolerance and intolerance. Such accounts serve to hide the racism at the core of discursive constructions of Muslims and Islam, instead presenting what Derrida calls the limit of hospitality:

Tolerance is always on the side of the reason of the strongest. . . which says of the other from its elevated position, I am letting you be, you are not insufferable, I am leaving you a place in my home, but do not forget that it is my home (Derrida, cited in Borradori 2003: 127).

Derrida’s formulation of a limited hospitality permits us to consider the sociopolitical contexts in which Islam is rendered abject. New forms of liberalism across the Global North are clear in situating Muslim citizens in terms of their ability and / or willingness to cohere to the norms and values of the national settings in which they reside. Interrogating this notion of cohesion, political debates about the viability of multiculturalism argue that by adopting the multicultural principle of recognition, nation states have willingly opened their doors to a hostility that they are now attempting to shut down via immigration controls and citizenship laws.

But despite narratives that present multicultural obsolescence and the failure of Muslims to successfully integrate, this issue is also about the multiple ways in which Muslims and non-Muslims experience, and potentially resist, such constructions of fear and intolerance. If we argue that mass media provides a limited space for negotiating cultural difference, perhaps new digital forms of communication present opportunities for citizens to produce and consume information in ways that circumnavigate hegemonic representations. Indeed, many recent studies assert that alternative media provide a space away from the narrow perspectives presented by media conglomerates, and these alternative media allow people to navigate their various identities free from structural power relations (Atton 2002; Guedes Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier 2008). While acknowledging the limitations that such alternative spaces provide for challenging dominant representations of Islam, it is perhaps in these spaces that we will find the possibilities for intercultural communication.

**Intersecting Identity**

One of the dangers of doing research about Muslims is reinforcing the notion of homogeneity among them. This was particularly problematic when devising a project on ‘Muslim media’ in which the research agenda clearly emphasized, for political reasons, ‘Muslimness’ (Holohan, Poole, Heeren and Zick in this issue). While the category is clearly manufactured and can be criticized for essentializing disparate communities, can we say it has any meaning? What constitutes ‘Muslim’ media in the United Kingdom and Germany? In Germany the answer is clearly no—the term does not have any meaning because Turkish media products predominate and have more relevance for the largely Turkish Muslims resident in Germany (who preferred to use the term specialist media). And yet for Muslim media producers working in the United Kingdom the term had resonance. The producers interviewed identified with the specific religio-social, cultural and political framework that the category expresses and believed that it differentiates itself from other media forms. So the term ‘Muslim media’ was used as a shorthand for media produced predominantly by Muslims for Muslims, and an effort was made to take into consideration the huge variations in terms of ethnic background, nationalities, etc. that this may incorporate or exclude. By focusing on a specific national context we could identify how this media has developed from those largely produced outside the United Kingdom to those, post Rushdie, that were locally produced and spoke to specifically ‘British Muslim’ identities. These identities are neither singular nor static. The focus on identity here also needs further unpacking. Following Hall and du Gay (1996) we recognize this as a process of the struggle over meaning which is both situational and constantly negotiated. Muslim media in the United Kingdom has potentially a significant role to play in the negotiation of identities for their producers and audiences and the wider pubic in articulating what it means to be a British Muslim. This intersects with other experiences and identifications and is constantly contested (Tsagarousianou 2001). One of these intersections is that of global media. The complexities of globalization both in terms of migratory experiences and media development means it is increasingly difficult to demarcate types of media as national, local, global, alternative or mainstream. And yet all the articles in this special issue have tried to do just that. When we delineate mainstream media we are identifying this media as dominant both in terms of size (organizationally and audience) and ideologically within a specific context. Yet Al-Jazeera could be described as a mainstream media source in the United Kingdom even though it is also a source of alternative news among many British audiences given its challenge to hegemonic ideologies, news values and sources dominant in the United Kingdom. To use the term ‘alternative’ media is equally problematic in that historically it signals media that is autonomous, democratic and progressive, and this is equally homogenizing and negates the influence of capitalist markets and ‘politico-bureaucratic agents’ on their operations which these media are equally subject to (Ferron 2012: 150). Using artificial and static categories of identity that may have little ‘reality in the flux and flow of social life’ (Tsagarousianou 2001: 22) can create significant problems for researchers, as we have found to our peril. The lack of consumption of ‘Muslim media’ in the results of a project featured here may just be a result of trying to impose such identities on audiences (Poole). And yet it has been argued by Martin (2008, cited in Bird 2009) that racial identity is a key filter through which news is passed. This is particularly pronounced when under attack. Hence, it becomes effective to utilize the category if the intention is to expose its artificiality and over simplification.

**Outline of Content**

In exploring the context in which public discourse about Muslims is produced, Deepa Kumar examines the networks of people and groups that form a ‘matrix of Islamophobia’ in the United States that affords them success in getting their views into mainstream media. By focusing on the ‘Ground Zero’ controversy, she shows how the far right, with the support of mainstream political figures, were able to win the battle to frame the debate and further their own political agendas. What was at stake, she argues, was nothing less than the identity of the American nation as a multicultural immigrant society. Thus, media coverage of this issue was contradictory, with both strong cultural racism as well as liberal defenses of multiculturalism present in prominent news media outlets.

Following Kumar’s analysis of the roles that various public figures play in constructing harmful public sphere narratives about Islam, in the first of three papers analyzing data from Muslims in the European Mediascape project, Siobhan Holohan draws on interviews with mainstream media practitioners in the United Kingdom to demonstrate the extent to which the nuances of everyday multicultural reality are lost in translation between events and their reproduction in a news setting dominated by ‘middle-class white men’ who largely dismiss the efforts of those attempting to establish an alternative space for dialogue. Presenting this discussion within the context of the parallel lives narrative that came to dominate public sphere constructions about Muslims in the United Kingdom, she argues that the continuation of old hierarchical structures in mainstream newsrooms recreates a dominant hegemonic view of social relations that re-states policies of community cohesion in terms of a one-dimensional version of what it means to be British.

Situated in a discourse that reconciles ‘the threat of Islam’ with state security and social cohesion, proclamations that multiculturalism has failed made by British Prime Minister David Cameron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel provide a link between Holohan’s narrative account of mediated hegemony in the United Kingdom to the next paper on the Muslims in the European Mediascape project. In their examination of the German media landscape, Jörg Heeren and Andreas Zick argue that contemporary public sphere discourses in Germany continue to demonize the largely Turkish Muslim immigrant population for failing to fully integrate into German society and culture. Here, however, we witness misgivings about the development of a parallel media, run by and for Muslims. Combining an analysis of media producers and audiences, Heeren and Zick suggest that it is precisely the separation of Muslims and non-Muslims into different public spheres that fail to communicate with one another that contributes to an atmosphere of intolerance, suspicion and fear.

We can perhaps see the logic of this argument played out in Milly Williamson’s paper focusing on the veil as a site of contested meaning. Asserting that mainstream media representations evoke Islamic otherness through their construction of the veil as synonymous with a refusal to integrate, she argues that the veil therefore became a potent symbol of opposition to British norms and values. Such symbolism reinforces the notion that ‘Muslimness’ is somehow antithetical to British notions of liberal tolerance, which must be protected, paradoxically, by curtailing the freedoms of those who seek to upset the dominant social order.

As we have seen from the articles discussed here, public and media discourses about Muslims in those countries tends toward the negative. But how is this consumed by audiences? Through an examination of the effects of a virulently anti-Islam propaganda movie, *Fitna*, Müller, van Zoonen and Hirzalla demonstrate that extensive media coverage may, in some cases, actually serve to diminish its impact among non-Muslims. By closely following the debate about *Fitna*, some viewers had a wider range of information at hand, and this enabled them to reject its fear-based appeals. How does this negative media content play out for Muslim populations? Does this lead to disaffection and disengagement with mainstream media? What other sources for accessing and interacting with media content—sources that speak to their religio-social political identities—are available to Muslims? In responding to these questions, Elizabeth Poole reveals how British Muslim media workers attempt to counter negative mainstream discourse about Muslims and Islam and provide a positive and diasporic space for identity and community building through their own media production. However, (Muslim) audience practices tend toward the mainstream and echo that of other audiences, demonstrating the multifaceted identities at play in the consumption of media products. Both papers challenge the notion of passive audiences easily manipulated by negative media coverage about Muslims and Islam, including the idea that Muslims operate in parallel media societies. But both these audience groups are better equipped to be critical when they have alternative perspectives to draw upon.

In addressing the continuing discursive marginalization of Muslims together with the ways in which Muslims themselves seek to redress the balance of impartial reporting via alternative channels of communication, this collection of articles attempts to elevate the discussion of the relationship between Muslims and the media beyond conventional understandings that see Muslims as simply disempowered or acted upon. Instead, these articles reveal a complex relationship between media professionals and the institutions they work for, and between audiences and the representations they consume. It is perhaps between these distinct spaces—individual and institution—that we can recognize the extent to which actors must negotiate identity—as media professional, as Muslim, as citizen—within a set of global power relations that prioritizes hegemonic constructions of otherness. Within these spaces we observe glimpses of positive acceptance toward the everyday multicultural reality played out in towns and cities across Europe and North America. But we must also be cautious about overstating this position. While the studies here show that Muslim and non-Muslim media producers and audiences are optimistic about multicultural social relations, a climate of fear generated by political and mainstream media discourses continues to grow. It is in part these dominant constructions of the dangerous other that limits the actual extent of multiculturalism. Although real social relations—the everyday interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims—can counter the effects of dominant constructions of otherness, the danger of not recognizing the power of media to negatively affect the lives of those subject to representation is that we continue to condone the intensifying intolerance toward Islam.

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