**‘Muslim Media’ and the Politics of Representation: Media and Cultural Responses to Diversity Issues in Britain[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Abstract**

This article examines data from a year-long project, ‘Muslims in the European Mediascape’, which explored the production and consumption of diversity issues in the United Kingdom and Germany. Here, I report on the findings from minority (predominantly Muslim) media producers and consumers in the United Kingdom; these findings demonstrate both the ambitions of the producers and the somewhat limited extent to which they are met among audiences. The research reveals a disconnect between producers and their target audiences in terms of the media consumption of those audiences, despite a similarity in their sociopolitical concerns. Perhaps more importantly, an analysis of participant discussions about media practices and life in the United Kingdom reveals more about the politics of representation and belonging in a period of considerable instability and change than it reveals about reported practices.

**Key words**

Minority media, ethnic media, minority producers, minority audiences, Muslims and media.

**Introduction**

In a period when attention is focused on social media and its ‘revolutionary’ capabilities, what alternative sources are available to British Muslims for accessing and interacting with media content that speaks to their varying sociopolitical and religious identities?[[2]](#footnote-2) Who produces this content, how do they approach diversity issues[[3]](#footnote-3) and where do they find their audiences? This article examines the data from predominantly Muslim, but also other, minority producers working in specialist media largely targeted at Muslim audiences (e.g., *The Muslim Post, Muslim News*, Islam Online, etc.) and the responses of Muslim audiences to representations of diversity issues.[[4]](#footnote-4) The aim is to provide counter narratives on Islam, as voiced by a range of Muslim producers and consumers, to dominant mainstream media ideologies.[[5]](#footnote-5) Previous studies have shown that this type of minority media offers British Muslims a platform to challenge negative mainstream discourse about Muslims and Islam, to voice their diverse concerns over social and political issues and to provide a positive and diasporic space for identity and community building (Ahmed 2006; Dayan 1998; Gillespie 2006). Evidence from this project demonstrates that these are central aims for producers working in media predominantly targeted at British Muslim populations. However, despite these positive intentions and the celebratory discourse around new media sources, findings from the consumption side of the project demonstrate that, except at particularly disruptive moments, everyday audience practices are more mundane, mainstream and ‘ordinary’. In the context of these results and the rising popularity of social media, we ask the question, do these minority media matter? Do they offer a solution to negative coverage of Islam by allowing audiences to circumnavigate this content? Who is talking and who is listening? Most importantly, this paper shows that, regardless of the actual consumption practices that may or may not be taking place, what people say about these practices is extremely valuable in demonstrating a politics of representation and belonging.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Minority Media**

In the last decade, and before, there has been a growth of media produced by and targeted toward Muslim audiences in the United Kingdom. This is partly driven by the growth of cultural politics in the post-Rushdie and 9/11 era but, more recently, also due to the explosion of new media forms as a result of technological developments. A healthy literature on minority media in Britain already exists. It focuses initially on black media from the 1970s and later on British Asian communities (for a review of the literature, see Cottle 2000), largely on the ethnic diversity in these organizations (Husband 1994). Criticisms of fixing audience positions by race resulted in a shift to predominantly small-scale qualitative research designed to gather nuanced data. Ethnographic research on transnational diasporic communities and their media consumption became prevalent from the 1990s onwards (see Gillespie 1995, 2002), and included audiences of the expanding Arab satellite media (Miladi 2006). These studies focused on the role of media or ICTs (Information Communication Technologies) in processes of belonging, identification and migration, on struggles over representation both within and by mainstream and minority media and, as this media landscape and social life becomes more complex, their changing role in public participation and contribution to public spaces (while acknowledging the role of cultural power in these relations) (Rigoni and Saitta 2012).

Perhaps it is to avoid essentializing that there has been little attempt to study what we have termed ‘Muslim media’ in the United Kingdom. The use of this label does not seek to reify this aspect of identity but is helpful in differentiating media that aims specifically to address Muslim issues (see the introduction in this issue for a more detailed discussion of definitions). 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, while Rigoni’s (2006, 2012) work on producers in Britain and France’s minority media provides an important precursor to the current study. This project, although small scale and largely qualitative, has generated results comparable to similar studies and so together they provide an indication of patterns of production and consumption of this specialist media (see Bonfadelli, Bucher and Piga 2007 for a review of these studies).[[7]](#footnote-7)

**‘Muslim Media’**

*Who are they?*

The most obvious outlets that might be described as ‘Muslim media’ in the United Kingdom are those larger news organizations that have developed out of a very particular British Muslim trajectory (often from South Asian diasporas) such as the Muslim News and the Muslim Weekly. While the study did include these types of organizations, others were not specifically newsgathering organizations, but rather social and cultural entities that produce written resources for educational or religious purposes, for example public and community events. Many have a combination of religious, political or sociocultural objectives. The types of organizations producers work for ranged from print media targeting broader Asian markets, community magazines, blogs and other Internet sites to NGOs and publishing companies, but most had developed within the United Kingdom. Audiences ranged from small (5,000 readers per month) to medium-sized (publications with monthly circulations of 60,000 with some supporting websites reaching 1.5 million hits a month). Most, however, were on the smaller end of the scale. All the producers in the sample described the politics of their organizations as ‘progressive’, focusing largely on humanitarian issues, social and cultural policy, identity and race relations. All the organizations described Muslims as their core audience or, in the case of two Asian publications in the sample, their largest audience, but were keen to emphasize their outward facing content.

Being small organizations, many outlets did not appear to have formal policies on diversity, but producers talked about their ‘mixed race’ profiles. The nature of the content combined with a heavy reliance on voluntary contributions and freelancers contributed to this. Most of the sample were well educated and male.

Those who had worked for mainstream organizations highlighted a difference between the print media and broadcasting.[[8]](#footnote-8) Producers working for newspapers felt it was not their remit to know what their organization’s policies on diversity and equality were. Those who had worked in broadcasting felt that diversity practices were more transparent but also related to meeting regulations and quotas. Local media appeared more sensitive to local demographics.

*Issues of Representation* *and* *Self- Representation*

If the mainstream media has been found lacking in its representations of Islam and Muslims (Poole 2002), and there was complete agreement here that this was the case, then these producers felt it was their responsibility to resist the ‘culturally defined frameworks of knowledge that take place in the encoding of media content’ (Georgiou and Gumbert 2006). While there was some praise for the enlightened approach to diversity issues demonstrated by the liberal press, participants noted that spiritual aspects of Islam and its diversity, achievements and contributions to civilization were missing in media coverage, along with coverage of attacks on Muslims, and Muslim voices themselves; ‘I often feel that the realities. . . that the very interesting realities and contours of Muslim communities in Europe or in Britain on the ground are often missed’ (producer).

As Islam has become a point of identification for those marginalized in a specific cultural social context (Samad 1998), it is perhaps unsurprising that some media professionals have turned to alternative methods of communicating a different worldview to audiences. Almost all of the producers working in these outlets could be located in this resistant position, their aim being to counter negative representations not so much with positive images (a strategy rejected as ‘promotion’) but with a more nuanced approach. This standpoint was certainly expressed here, although, as Rigoni and Saitta (2012) argue, it is important not to assume this position in ethnic media, which often develops following a market logic. This positioning produced neither reactionary nor sectarian content, rather the participants demonstrated a thoughtful, measured and balanced approach to coverage. 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. This was partly due to the fact that they were not tied to the news agenda and therefore did not engage in regular newsgathering. This related to publication cycles (e.g., bi-monthly) and resources. None of the outlets were large enough to have specialists who could be sent out to cover specific stories relating to the wider news agenda. Rather, they relied either on the interests of others submitting material or followed their own interests. Hence, they tended to offer more feature-based stories of a human interest or religious nature. In fact, a few of the producers actively chose not to adopt this responsive mode of practice as they felt it reproduced the agendas and discourse of dominant ideologies.

New and social media was cited as a source of greater diversity (of coverage). This was not only perceived as a positive development, but as a factor that would also lead to a ‘quantity over quality’ approach to media production and increased fragmentation, which could undermine democracy.

*Impact of Coverage*

Producers in this study were in agreement that media coverage can have a negative impact on inter-group and community relations. Its effects could include an increase in antagonism, tension and even racial violence. It was agreed that the media needed to be sensitive when reporting in some situations. Most journalists said that they had adapted or carefully considered the way they had covered a story because of community tensions. There was also recognition that negative coverage leads to frustrations among Muslims and feelings of exclusion. Some went as far as to say that negative coverage breeds extremism.

In this regard it was felt that giving Muslims a voice has a positive impact on integration. In other words, producers questioned in this study felt that Muslim media could provide a channel for the articulation of frustrations and a vehicle for young Muslims who are politically mobilized. However, it was also agreed that this space (of recognition) should be provided in mainstream media.

*Ethnic/Cultural Backgrounds*

The majority of journalists interviewed said that their religious and ethnic identities made them better 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. They also had more contacts and access to particular communities as sources, because they were trusted (although they also recognized the challenges that came with this in relation to maintaining objectivity).

Of those who had worked in mainstream media, most felt that they were expected to represent Muslims or ethnic minorities due to assumptions about ‘specialist knowledge’ and access. Some felt positively about this; that an individual had the opportunity to make a difference by challenging accepted practice. However, some found this challenging, particularly if colleagues were resistant, and others had lost jobs when their objectivity had been questioned. One participant suggested that while there were several high profile minority presenters, few existed among the production staff. A few participants thought that class was an equally significant factor in being accepted in the workplace. As this issue was also raised by ethnic minority producers working in mainstream media, some of the data relating to this is included below.

*Ethnic Minority Producers in Mainstream Media*

This section briefly discusses some of the experiences of those minority producers who chose to work in mainstream media; it covers the ethnic composition of these organizations and the ways in which this impacted their work and their own views on ‘Muslim media’.

Participants were only aware of diversity policies in large national organizations, for example the BBC. Other than at Al-Jazeera English, most observed that newsrooms were predominantly white, male and middle-class, and felt this to be problematic.[[9]](#footnote-9) It suggested that tokenism was evident in some broadcast organizations, 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, although this resource was not always available. While it was recognized then that Muslims and ethnic minorities were generally under-represented in newsrooms, this was coupled with a belief that this should not impact the way stories are covered. Most of the participants asserted that any good journalist should be able to cover any story (in line with their colleagues from non-migrant backgrounds) with some acknowledgment that a particular background may benefit a journalist based on access. Because of this, minority journalists working in the mainstream media in the United Kingdom had felt pigeon-holed by the types of stories they were encouraged to pursue. In some cases this had been regarded as a positive trend, because it enabled some journalists to approach subject matter sympathetically. This demonstrates the difficult path minority producers are required to navigate between perceived cultural obligations and required professional duties, whether this be to locate a minority identity or not. These ‘conflicting loyalties’ of personal integrity and professional responsibilities can present significant ethical dilemmas and conflicts of identity which may be felt on a daily basis (Muir and Smith 2011).

Despite these challenges some producers had chosen to work only in the mainstream media rather than working toward what they perceived as the further marginalization of minority publics. Some of these producers had reservations about the usefulness of minority media because it may result in what one termed ‘echo chambers’. The quality of these outlets was also questioned, mainly because of their lack of resources. Some doubted its political impact. Of course the irony is that any Muslim media outlet that was overtly political would be condemned as ‘extremist’.

**Audience Responses**

*Methodological note*

The material used here is drawn from the responses of 50 Muslims in six focus groups and a small online survey conducted in 2011. All groups reflected the local Muslim population in those areas: Stoke, Stafford and London. In Stoke these were mainly British Pakistanis and in Stafford, international students from Bangladesh and Iran. These participants do not identify as being British but were included as constituting part of the UK Muslim population at a particular moment in time. The London groups were predominantly Black Africans, many foreign-born and from a range of countries of origin (14 people in total). The sample was fairly mixed in relation to age, employment and gender although everyone was educated to at least GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) standard. One group was particularly biased toward young male participants. English was the primary language spoken (by 13), then Arabic (6), followed by various other languages, depending on country of origin. While the sample therefore included Muslims from a range of backgrounds, it was perhaps not representative of the UK Muslim population (which is mainly South Asian), because of the large number of Black Africans included. However, the sample groups did reflect the local populations from which they were drawn. Two groups included a mixed population in terms of background, ethnicity and religion. The survey was by no means conducted with a representative sample. It was a small-scale survey that overrepresented the highly educated. However, current demographic data shows that Muslims account for 4.6 percent of the total population.[[10]](#footnote-10) The proportion of Muslims represented in this sample is 21.4 percent. The survey was not intended to stand alone. Due to correspondence with the findings of the focus groups (and other studies, see Bonfadelli, et al. 2007) the data provides some indication of patterns of consumption among some groups of people in the United Kingdom. The aim was to sample a range of the diversity of Muslims living in the United Kingdom. This diversity strengthens the main finding that people tend to consume news in the mainstream supplemented by a few reliable sources.

*Media use*

A general desire to follow the news has been found in previous studies (Madianou 2009). Here only one group expressed reticence to do this due to disaffection with mainstream media, though even here there was still a desire to keep up to date with current affairs. The main source of news for most was television closely followed by the Internet and on these platforms the BBC, followed by Al-Jazeera (a mix of Arabic and English) then SKY news. Radio (mentioned only once), newspapers and other print media lagged far behind. Otherwise, consumption was diverse. Social media was used, but mainly as a social tool. A few people referred to local news in Stoke-on-Trent. Muslim media sources cited included the Islam Channel, Press TV and Peace TV. Only one print source was cited by two people (a local religious paper). Alternative news was mainly sourced from Al-Jazeera.[[11]](#footnote-11)

*Media representation*

The subject of media representations of Muslims dominated the discussions and, not surprisingly, the participants unanimously agreed that these tended to be negative to different degrees. Many people referred to being ‘stereotyped’ and ‘targeted’. There was little attempt to differentiate between media forms and outlets but when pressed, the tabloid press was singled out for criticism, while some people identified the *Guardian* and the *Independent* as being ‘unbiased’. There was some disagreement over how neutral the BBC was, particularly with regard to its reporting of Israel (it was understood by some to be ‘pro-Israel’). In general, people believed that television was less obvious than the press in its negativity because of the regulations it is subject to (this has been found elsewhere, by Samad for example, 1998).

Particularly notable was the extreme distrust toward the media (in general) expressed by women in the London focus group. The exclusion felt by this group (from mainstream media in the United Kingdom plus experiences of media in their home countries) generated highly negative emotions and had led to a disengagement from it, with participants preferring to hear things ‘by word of mouth’. This illustrates the affective aspect of news, in this case emotional responses, shaping consumption and use (Madianou 2009). This group and other participants used the research as a forum to contest claims made in the media. Indeed, one could argue that the eagerness by some Muslims to participate in this type of research illustrates the need for a platform to voice these oppositional narratives, a platform that they have not found elsewhere.

When asked why, given its negativity, participants used mainstream media, people argued that they were selective in what they consumed—with some people actively seeking out stories that had relevance for them (often men) while others avoided them (often women). This demonstrates how religious identity is not always at the forefront of decision making in relation to media consumption. Drawing on the work of Hall, Samad argues that identity is ‘contingent and contextual’ (1998: 430) and where one is presented as dominant others are always present. For producers this religio-political aspect of their identity was a dominant cultural marker while for the consumers multifaceted identities were at play. D’Haenens (2002) has previously suggested that socio-demographic factors are more important than ethnic cultural origin in use of the media. Participants also stressed the need to access a range of sources for balance. For most people the gap was satisfactorily filled by Al-Jazeera or the BBC World Service.

*Role of new media*

In general, most people seemed to use social media (such as Facebook and/or Twitter) but clearly perceived this to be a tool primarily for social use. However, in relation to specific stories discussed in the groups, social media was seen as having a political function (primarily by others). Here, people highlighted consequences that were potentially positive (Arab Spring) and negative (as an organizational tool in the London riots). Some felt that it was useful for breaking news and, some of the women in the London group considered it a more trusted source than mainstream media for its ‘eye witness accounts’. Social media was largely perceived, then, to be one of many alternative sources of information.

*On Muslim media*

1. *Concept of Muslim media*

There was more differentiation among consumers than producers regarding the concept of Muslim media. There was a split between those who felt the term was inaccurate (that perhaps ethnic/regional media would be a better descriptor), and those who were comfortable with it (that the term had ‘resonance’). One participant suggested that because ‘Muslim media’ has little reach, it lacks impact.

1. *Uses of Muslim media*

As demonstrated by the previous section on media usage, media aimed at Muslims in the United Kingdom seems to have a limited reach. While many participants did emphasize the importance of alternative sources of news, for most people this was identified as Al-Jazeera, with some individuals also mentioning the Islam Channel and Press TV. Otherwise, use of minority media appears to be occasional. People used Al-Jazeera and the BBC World Service for news about countries of origin and about specific issues regarding Muslims or countries that they felt were not represented fairly in UK mainstream media.

Only one person claimed to use diasporic media, or media from their country of origin. There was a general feeling that the BBC World Service covered these topics just as well. The women in the London group argued that channels coming from specific home countries were just as biased and to be viewed with caution (excluding Al-Jazeera which, for this group, was the only organization to be trusted). While there was a realization that all media may be biased, consuming a range of sources allowed access to a variety of opinion and events.

For one young person, mainstream media had more relevance: ‘with me I don’t watch most of the Asian channels. Because I live here, I’m more focused on what is going on around me here and what’s going to affect me now and in the future’ (female, Staffordshire). Other studies have found a similar use of mainstream TV among the young, regardless of background (Bonfadelli, et al. 2007; Samad 1998).

In the mixed London group, discussion centered on the possibility for extreme voices to emerge from specialist media. Yet more points were made about the possibility that it could lead to further marginalization of voices. This was clearly an issue of citizenship for some people. Regardless of whether or not people were reporting their media use accurately, the desire to feel part of the wider society and be represented was expressed, thus highlighting the politics of belonging. This perhaps is exposed more clearly in a mixed group where pressures to appear moderate may force a greater emphasis on participating in the mainstream.

*Impact and community relations*

The politics of belonging was also illustrated by discussions of impact. The main impact cited was the negative effect coverage might have on the attitudes of non-Muslims, and how Muslims are perceived in the United Kingdom (and for one, even suspicion of other Muslims). The women in the London group felt particularly emotional about this, and referred to the ways that coverage causes them to worry about exclusion and the effects of this on their families. The negative impact on community relations was felt by most participants, with Muslims worried about how the media fuels negative perceptions and non-Muslims fearing social segregation and the consequences. The negative effects of media coverage were illustrated starkly following the Woolwich incident, after which many mosques were attacked.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Social fracture was perceived to be widespread by several participants, but it was agreed that this should not be blamed on Muslims. There were mixed views on segregation: some rejected the idea that the United Kingdom was segregated and others agreed. Some supported segregation, arguing that this should not be seen as a problem but viewed as living in like-minded communities. These participants rejected the negative connotations segregation carries in the mainstream media and suggested that the portrayal of the ‘problem’ community was in itself a media construct.

Most people thought that multiculturalism worked well in Britain and were keen to stress its benefits. One argued that ‘It’s not multiculturalism that’s failed, I’m sorry. You know it’s our governments who have failed certain communities’ (female, Staffordshire). Residents of London, in particular, argued that the city itself demonstrates the success of multiculturalism and felt part of a harmonious ‘open minded’ community. This was highlighted by young students in Stoke and London who felt less affected by community tensions, and claimed they maintained good relations with people from different backgrounds, particularly at university or college. In contrast, international participants in the mixed London group perceived the city to be a collection of segregated communities living alongside each other, and in that sense suggested that multiculturalism had failed.

Still, most people felt that relations in *their* diverse communities were good and that mixing was good for community relations, and allowed individuals to learn from each other. One participant mentioned the mutual support between the Muslim and Sikh communities during the disturbances of summer 2011, but felt that this support was omitted from media coverage. While feeling safe within these multicultural spaces then, described by one as a ‘bubble’, people were worried about how they would be treated if they ventured outside of them and quoted personal experiences of racism and prejudice. In this way, negative media coverage may well contribute to real divisions in society.

Despite a difference of opinion on this matter people were acutely aware of how current media coverage excludes them from the wider public sphere and civic engagement. However, this non-incorporation was strongly rejected. The emphasis in this research on mainstream consumption and claims to British identity illustrates the desire to be included as full members of British society.

*Discussion and conclusion*

From the results of the producers’ interviews it would appear that Muslim media does offer a site of resistance (to dominant media narratives) and a space for collective/self-determination, given

* The growth and range of these organizations,
* That producers working in Muslim media believe that mainstream media coverage has a polarizing effect and Muslim media could serve as an outlet for this frustration.
* That the Muslim media producers in this study demonstrate a professional, critical and intelligent journalistic approach to diversity issues. They aim to have a positive impact, counter negative media coverage of Muslims and provide a more nuanced understanding of diversity issues, based on their own acute understanding of these.
* That producers believe that Muslim media is an increasingly valuable resource for mainstream media because it contributes to the diversity of voices available.

In all these ways, British ‘Muslim’ media offers a new form of cultural expression that has sought to intervene in and contribute to multicultural public spaces. However, the findings from both the mainstream media producers and the consumer sample demonstrate a ‘difference of perception’ narrative given that these outlets still have little impact, being hardly recognized by the mainstream media or publics they are aimed toward. Media use remains in the mainstream demonstrating that consumers remain tied to the notion of a national mainstream media as their ‘go to’ place for news and information. This reflects a desire to participate in a national public sphere and is related to ‘feelings’ of inclusion in wider society (Couldry 2006; Madianou 2005). It also demonstrates that in relation to their role as producers of ethnic media the ‘Muslim’ aspect of identity is foregrounded while for audiences this dimension of identity is just one among a multitude of factors that may inform their consumption choices and practices.[[13]](#footnote-13) For producers, resistance is a primary objective in choosing to work in ethnic media, while for audiences use is situational. Hence, like the rest of the population, Muslim audiences turn to a wide range of media and their consumption patterns reflect those of the wider population (see also Müller 2005). This does not support the idea of a parallel media society (see Holohan, this issue). There appears, then, to be a disconnect here in ‘imagining identification’ (Samad 1998).[[14]](#footnote-14) Muslim media has some way to go before it has an impact on mainstream public discourse as did the strong political discourse of the black press in 1980s.[[15]](#footnote-15) It may just be that a focus on ‘Muslimness’ is what leads to its lack of credibility in the wider public sphere given the preconceptions held about Muslims in the United Kingdom.

There are, of course, various reasons for this, including structural constraints, from the depoliticizing of Muslim voices that deems anyone speaking from outside a ‘moderate’ perspective ‘extreme’ and the political economy of mainstream media that generates sensationalist content from specific and limited sources. While digital technologies have clearly enabled the multiplication of alternative media and provided a much needed platform for minority or special interest groups, in a market-driven media environment it can be difficult for smaller enterprises to gain a significant audience share. These enterprises may remain economically marginalized and rely on ‘switched on’ audiences finding them. While the Internet provides an opportunity for the growth of an alternative media market, many small media organizations rely on funding from advertising revenue and, as is the case with some of the media catering to ethnic minority groups, government grants, third-sector or community funding. Political economic conditions that affect all news organizations are often felt more harshly in these organizations, which are further impounded by cultural obligations and audience expectations. Hence, these voices often get lost in a competitive global market. According to Georgiou and Gumbert ‘Between the international media organizations and everyday communications stand intermediate minority media organizations. These organizations steer a difficult course between universalist appeals, market imperatives, and systems of patronage on the one side, and particularistic aims, community based expectations and felt obligations on the other’ (2006: 15). Hence the dissatisfaction among minority audiences found across academic studies (see Ross 2001). However, they are also, sometimes, free of some of the institutional constraints felt by mainstream organizations, such as rigid hierarchies, production cycles and access to limited sources, and able to challenge professional norms of ‘objectivity’. While faced with constraints, ethnic media also offer opportunities in a diversified fragmented public space(s).

This is not to discount the findings of research projects on diasporic media consumption (Brah 1996; Appadurai 1990). Young people especially participate in transnational public spheres (Gillespie 2006). The consumption of Al-Jazeera here is an example of what Bonfadelli refers to as the ‘globalised sphere of international TV programs, (where) media symbols and formats targeted at young people are highly visible’ (Bonfadelli, et al. 2007: 163). However, this study reinforces the need to be cautious about some of the claims we make relating to aspects of minority media, particularly in relation to any ‘revolutionary’ features. Our findings reveal that most media practices are fairly mundane, everyday, ordinary. This is not to say that these practices are not transformative culturally and therefore politically. As Silverstone (2005) notes, consuming news can be an important component of everyday life and offer familiarity and reassurance, which can contribute to feelings of belonging. However, we should not assume a relationship between mainstream media use and social ‘integration’. Equally, high levels of diasporic media consumption do not correspond with segregation. Hafez (2002) suggests that the best stance is that of biculturalism, where the immigrant group are reflexive and critical to both media of origin and the new country as well. This dualistic position is supported by Bonfadelli et al., who argue that integration does not require a change of identity—this would be a ‘process of alienation’—rather, ‘hybrid identities offer a positive resource for the development of a particular positive attitude in a multicultural society’ (Bonfadelli, et al. 2007: 166). Following this, Rigoni and Saitta (2012) have developed an idea of ‘co-presence’ and a culture of mobility whereby time/space relationships are characterized by a multiplicity of affinities.

One of the weaknesses of this sort of project is the self-reporting methodology which may not reveal actual practices but here reveals something just as valid. Here, the audiences are making a statement about citizenship and making a claim for a place in public discourse. We should be aware that the participants may be conscious of the debates on parallel societies and understand that viewing minority media may be seen as socially unacceptable; in this case the research project becomes a forum for the performance of identities. Another danger is the presentation of Muslim voices as a homogenous body of opinion. We cannot reduce responses to essentialized audience positions based on a static view of ethnicity or race. This study challenges the widely held belief that some minority communities are living in a kind of parallel society. Indeed, it suggests that rather than consuming alternative media at the expense of mainstream media, consumers ‘top-up’ their mainstream quota with a range of different additional sources. In this regard, it becomes increasingly difficult to categorize audiences in the contemporary fragmented media environment, as people turn to a variety of sources and are able to mix and match across a range of local, national, international, print, broadcast and digital media. In this context it is difficult to fix audiences at all. Rather, this paper seeks to explore both the politics of representation and belonging in the production and consumption of minority media.

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2. For a discussion of mainstream/alternative media see the editorial in this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In this case coverage which discusses ethnic or religious issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The data comes from a year-long project (2011), ‘Muslims in the European Mediascape’ funded by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue working with the Vodafone Foundation and the British Council. The overarching aim of this project was to comparatively analyze patterns in the media use and production of people of Muslim and non-Muslim background in Europe. This was further divided into smaller parts. This paper deals, in the main, with producers working in specialist media but with some reference to the views of minority producers working in mainstream media as a point of comparison. Some of this material is taken from Holohan and Poole (2012), *Muslims in the European Mediascape UK Country Report*, ISD. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. While it is increasingly difficult to demarcate mainstream media, which has been traditionally defined according to factors such as ownership, size, content, etc., for the purpose of this project, it is conceived as those media dominant in the UK context and aimed at national and regional populations with a potentially global reach. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As defined by Hall (1997) and Anthias (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The methods relating to the production side of the project are discussed further in Holohan (this issue). For this part of the project fourteen (Muslim) producers working at all levels of the specialist media were interviewed, in addition to eight minority producers in the mainstream media (see page 9) using a purposive sampling method. We recognize that the term ‘British Muslim’ is a construction but is also a term of self-identification often used by these outlets to signify a specific identity while recognizing the diversity of peoples it includes (http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/about-us/). The methodology has obvious limitations given that we are merely reporting on what the producers and audiences say they do, rather than having observed it ourselves, but we contend that this also produces significant findings. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The mainstream media included large broadcasting organizations plus well-known print media and online sources. The sample included a preponderance of organizations with liberal politics; this was a result of the self-selecting approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Males were over-represented in this sample; this may be a reflection of the make-up of the news rooms. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See British Religion in Numbers: http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/?p=598. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This mainstream media use and popularity of television has also been found in other studies of minorities use of media, for example, Tsagarousianou (2001) and RICU (2010). The RICU’s research on British Muslim media consumption included 1,124 participants and its sample was informed by the 2001 census. The study also found a high level of participation in mainstream media, as well as religious participation, and a high level of interest in the news. The BBC was the most popular source, as was TV. However, here newspapers were more popular than the Internet. Ethnic media (cited sources being the Internet and the Islam Channel) was used when seeking out stories on this topic. This also corresponds with our findings (albeit from a different source—Al-Jazeera—for our participants). The print media has also been found to be less popular by Bonfadelli, et al. (2007) and Samad (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Lee Rigby, an off-duty soldier, was beheaded in the streets of Woolwich (a London borough) by two men who claimed to be acting in the name of Islam. Media coverage sensationalized the incident and labeled it an ‘al Qaeda terrorist attack’. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. While for Muslim producers working in mainstream media this aspect of identity is often imposed or externally determined. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It is quite obvious that Muslim media targeted at specific diasporic groups will not connect with Muslims with quite different backgrounds but the lack of specialist media use by all the different users here allows us to make this claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. However, these media forms should not be deemed meaningless for their lack of impact on the mainstream, they are important in reclaiming identities as the participants did here with absolute conviction. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)