**What is a Cohesive Community Anyway?**

**The Role of Mainstream Media in Narratives of (Dis)Integration**

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**Abstract**

The perceived failure of minority communities to integrate into mainstream culture and society has been of such concern in recent years that there have been a series of political endeavors to shore up notions of citizenship, inclusion, and (national) identity, indeed about what it means to be British. This paper considers political discourses about the failure of multiculturalism and the subsequent implementation of community cohesion strategies in relation to David Cameron’s recent treatise on muscular liberalism, in order to reflect upon notions of segregation, identity and cohesion in the United Kingdom. Data from the Muslims in the European Mediascape project is used to consider to what extent dominant hegemonic discourses of Muslim communities permeate media production practices. Based on an analysis of interviews with mainstream media producers in the United Kingdom, the key concern of this paper is to explore whether media production practices can be said to reinforce the current form of hegemonic liberalism.

**Key words**

Muslims, multiculturalism, community cohesion, muscular liberalism, media producers

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In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2011, given just weeks after the start of the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and on the day that the English Defence League marched in London, UK Prime Minister David Cameron once again highlighted the perceived threat posed by radicalized young Muslims around the world. Echoing concerns expressed by Tony Blair in a speech given in 2006, Cameron made clear links between global Islamist extremism, the radicalization of young people in the United Kingdom and the professed failure of a political ideology and set of policies that sought to enable people of different ethnicities and faiths to pursue their individual cultural practices without prejudice. Stating that ‘under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream’, Cameron’s speech tapped into recurrent popular anxieties about the Muslim threat from within; this paved the way for his assertion of ‘muscular liberalism’; a form of liberalism that is intolerant to those that oppose the core values of British society. For sections of the news media in the United Kingdom, his speech presented a further opportunity to re-emphasize what by then had become an all too familiar trope: the failure of multiculturalism, the problem of self-segregation and the pernicious spread of Islam across the British heartlands.

Within this discursive context of community (dis)integration and the reassertion of hegemonic liberalism under the current coalition government, this article explores the relationship between mainstream media production practices in the United Kingdom and the public sphere narratives, such as those presented above, that continue to problematize Muslim communities in Britain. In the first two sections of this paper, I briefly re-examine public narratives about segregated communities in order to provide a contextual consideration of how the past decade has witnessed a steady increase in negative discourses about Islam and Muslims in the United Kingdom. In this regard I reflect on how events such as the riots in the North of England in 2001 and the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and 7/7 contributed to the shift from policies that promoted multiculturalism to the introduction of community cohesion as a strategy for encouraging integration (Kundnani 2007). I then examine Cameron’s version of muscular liberalism.

To extend this conceptual analysis the paper draws on qualitative interview data from the Muslims in the European Mediascape project[[1]](#footnote-1) to consider the extent to which media professionals might recognize their position within the hegemonic discursive shift from multiculturalism to community cohesion and, in turn, to muscular liberalism. The project, situated within the parallel lives debate central to contemporary discourses about community relations, looked at patterns of production and consumption in the United Kingdom and investigated the extent to which an increasingly fragmented media landscape might impact intercultural community relations. However, the current paper does not present a consideration of Muslim media practices or audience responses to the narratives produced in a diverse array of media.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nor is the intention to examine media representations of Muslims in Britain; these have been extensively analyzed elsewhere (for example, Poole 2002; Morey and Yaqin 2011; Petley and Richardson 2011). Instead, the aim is to examine mainstream media production practices in relation to stories about Muslims in order to assess the extent to which such practices might work to reproduce hegemonic discourses of liberal tolerance. To this end the final section presents an analysis of interviews with professionals working in the mainstream media in Britain. Here, I consider how journalists respond to breaking stories and the views of those that write the news, as a means to evaluate the link between production practices and public sphere narratives about intergroup community relations, with the goal of unpacking the extent to which the current political project of hegemonic liberalism is reproduced through newsroom practices.

**The Road to Cohesion**

By the time Cameron gave his speech in 2011, the view that multiculturalism had failed had become all too familiar. Understanding multiculturalism as an ideology that stresses a citizen’s right to assert difference, by 2000 social commentators such as Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, began to argue that the acceptance of otherness had instead resulted in a fractured society. Indeed rather than uniting around a singular British identity, it was argued that multicultural Britain had fragmented to form a series of separate communities with no perceivable core. Kundnani (2001) suggests that state multiculturalism[[3]](#footnote-3) began to lose favor after the publication of *The* *Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* report (Runnymede Trust 2000). In essence, the report remained committed to the core principle of multiculturalism espoused by Taylor (1994); that is, to embrace difference and treat all people equally regardless of ethnic background, culture or faith. However, the introduction of the report also forewarned that at the turn of the millennium Britain was at a crossroads. Not only was it facing up to the effects of devolution within the British Isles, but it was clear that global migration had impacted the way citizens thought about their identity, and indeed, whether it meant anything to be British at all. Interrogating socioeconomic inequalities between different ethnic groups in towns and cities across the United Kingdom, the report suggested that such fragmentation could lead to mistrust and violence between distinct groups. The report termed this ‘the politics of resentment’ (Runnymede Trust 2000: 4) and argued that too much difference could pull the nation apart. Despite this pessimistic prophecy, the report put forward an argument that Britain had the ability to create a new type of society. Following Anderson’s (1983) thesis, this society would be one in which all citizens could unite around a story of Britain; a national imaginary that recognized Britain’s long history of successful adaptation to the waves of migration that had come before. Asserting that there had never been one view of what it meant to be British, the report suggested that differences be acknowledged in order to find new commonalities. At the heart of the recommendations was the notion of a ‘community of communities’. While not abandoning the multiculturalist task to embrace difference, this idea envisioned people forming connections between their separate social and cultural, public and private spheres.

While acknowledging its limitations, Kundnani (2001) argues that the Runnymede Trust report provided an opportunity to revise the political multiculturalist agenda in order to pursue a set of principles surrounding core citizenship rights and responsibilities. However, Rhodes (2009) suggests that the riots that took place across the North of England the following year instead cemented the turn away from state multiculturalism toward a more hard-line approach to race relations in the United Kingdom.[[4]](#footnote-4) Referring to the ‘colour-blind racism’ debate in the United States, Rhodes argues that the media and political discourses after the riots worked to divert attention from structural racism in two important ways. First, he argues that the public debate following the riots focused on the causal effect of the actual or rumored far-right marches in the affected areas. Here racist groups like the National Front were designated outcasts, peripheral to ‘normal’ mainstream members of society, therefore they could not be seen to represent the views of the majority of ‘ordinary’ citizens. Second, Rhodes states that the young men predominantly of Bangladeshi and Pakistani background, who violently protested the planned marches, were labeled as abject members of a community that chose to live apart from mainstream society. As a consequence, instead of having legitimate cause for protest, they became signifiers for a strange and potentially volatile community. At this point both groups became empty containers for forms of extremism that concealed any genuine grievance about structural inequalities that may have legitimately precipitated the violence.

The official response to the riots was swift. Within months several official reports had been produced examining both the local disturbances and the wider series of events.[[5]](#footnote-5) The most prominent of these, the Cantle Report (2001), painted a picture of communities failing to fully integrate into wider British society. It was in this report that we first see the phrase ‘parallel lives’ appear:

<block>Whilst the physical segregation of housing estates and inner city areas came as no surprise, the team was particularly struck by the depth of polarization of our towns and cities. The extent to which these physical divisions were compounded by so many other aspects of our daily lives, was very evident. Separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks, means that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives (Cantle 2001: 9). </block>

In addressing the difficulties outlined above, the Cantle Report offered a series of 67 recommendations centering on the rights and responsibilities of *all* members of British society. Embedded in the recommendations were those that put forward the notion of community cohesion that has dominated political discourses on race relations for much of the 2000s. Here, it presented the idea that cohesion might be achieved if those living on the ethnic margins of UK society were enabled to partake in mainstream social, cultural and political life. Though careful not to blame particular ethnic or religious communities for the conditions leading up to the disturbances, recommendations from the report were manifest in the media discourses that followed in two ways: (1) South Asian[[6]](#footnote-6) communities were criticized for a failure to integrate into mainstream society; and (2) those communities were pressured to resolve the perceived problem of self-segregation (Holohan and Poole 2002). Moving away from the central thrust of the recommendations, media reports instead presented a blame discourse that introduced the concept of problem ‘Muslim communities’. While the Runnymede Trust had identified Islamophobia in their 1997 report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, it was perhaps in the post-riot discourse, more than any other, that ‘Muslim’ was cemented as a racialized category.

Similar to Rhodes’ (2009) later reading of the riots discourse as one that articulated peripheral extremism, Holohan and Poole (2002) had previously argued that part of the reason behind this discursive shift lay in media explanations that sought out views from Asian spokespersons. Here, by using non-Muslim Asian spokespersons to denounce the violence said to have emanated from ‘Muslim enclaves’, media reports succeeded in differentiating between ‘good’ Asian (established post-war settlers—hard-working and unobtrusive) and ‘bad’ Asian (more recent migrants from volatile regions and of seemingly hostile faith). This approach had the dual effect of laying blame at the feet of a generic outlying community (Muslims), and of protecting the media from accusations of racism. So while it has been convincingly argued that negative media coverage of Muslims in the United Kingdom increased in the years prior to the 2001 riots (Poole 2002; Modood 2011), the events in 2001, together with the subsequent policy reports, are regarded by many as a turning point in the definition and problematization of Muslims as a homogenous community of others, and instrumental in the formation of a hegemonic discourse that is less tolerant to difference (Phillips 2006, 2010; Flint and Robinson 2008; Kalra and Rhodes 2009).

**Narratives of [Dis]integration**

Many argue that the move to narratives of otherness centering on faith, as identified above, reflect the acceleration of globalization over the past twenty years (for example, see Petley and Richardson 2011; Morey and Yaqin 2011). The 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington just a few months after the North of England riots reinforced the notion of Islam as a growing global problem. Indeed, it is precisely because Islam is not tied to any one nation or ethnic group that it follows the logic of globalization. Following Bauman’s (2006) thesis, like globalization, and like terrorism, Islam is fluid; it can cut across borders and therefore cannot be easily defined or contained. In the United Kingdom, as in many other non-Islamic states around the world, this global spectacle of violence served to reinforce the growing unease about local Muslim populations and worked to re-ignite fears about the enemy within, or what Bauman has called liquid fear. Here, the unfixed nature of Islam—it is not tied to any one ethnic group or nation—meant that it became an empty signifier within which to fill a whole range of dominant ideologies created to reinforce the structural authority of the West. This can be seen in the wake of 9/11 when Britain and America went to war against Afghanistan and Iraq on the basis of their perceived links to an Islamist terrorist threat. By making the link between Islam, terrorism and the Middle East, dominant political and media discourses succeeded in reinforcing a racialized form of Islam as the primary indication of abject otherness (Modood 2003; Grillo 2010). So, paradoxically, even though race had been displaced by faith in the post-riot discourse, the racialized context remained a prominent feature in the media accounts that followed, because in the same way that Islam had become synonymous with Middle Eastern terrorism, the UK ‘Muslim’ directly corresponded with ‘Asian’, or to put it more bluntly, Muslim’s have brown faces.

If multiculturalism was not already dying, such globally mediated events further emphasized the need to move away from a set of principles that celebrated difference. The specter of the global terrorist threat that hung over Europe and America after 9/11 spurred the retreat from multiculturalist principles that had been said to enable citizens to live separate lives. The argument was that if people are not invested in the nation as citizens we cannot know if they are friend or foe. By the time the 7/7 attacks on London took place in 2005, a raft of measures had been put in place to reorder British core identification. Here, Joppke (2004) argues that the citizenship ceremonies and language courses for new migrants to the United Kingdom implemented after recommendations made in the Goldsmith Review (2004) demonstrate a retreat from the principles and policies of multiculturalism and a turn to ‘civic integration’. Phillips (2006, 2010) argues that the notion of self-segregation was central to this political narrative. The impression put forward by official documents and amplified by media narratives, that British Muslims lived in self-created ghettos, reinforced (South Asian) Muslims as the enemy within (Khiabany and Williamson 2011). Indeed, while the reports that emerged from the riots set the ball rolling on the discussion about ‘what to do with segregated communities’, Grillo (2010) argues that discourses surrounding the global terrorist threat made the implementation of community cohesion strategies to encourage core identification with Britain imperative. Consequently, community cohesion became part of a political philosophy that espoused communitarian ideals that sought ‘to revalue and remobilize civil society’ (Wetherell 2007: 4).

Of course in recent years the notion that multiculturalism has died and been resurrected has appeared so many times that Gilroy (2012) recently labeled it as a zombie category, as popularized in an interview with Ulrich Beck in 2001. Here, Beck states that in sociology zombie categories ‘are “living dead” categories which govern our thinking but are not really able to capture the contemporary milieu’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 262). Following this idea, Gilroy argues that despite the tide of political rhetoric guiding us toward the view that state multiculturalism is no longer a viable doctrine, multiculturalism is alive and well in our lived experience or what Werbner (2013) calls everyday multiculturalism. In other words, simply saying that multiculturalism is dead does not eradicate the *fact* that Britain is a multiethnic, multicultural and multifaith society. Indeed, Modood and Meer (2009) extend this logic to state multiculturalism when they argue that despite rhetoric denying the existence of multiculturalism, policies continue to exist that uphold its fundamental principles.

Modood (2003, 2007, 2010) has for many years dismissed claims that multiculturalism has lost its value, arguing that to deny the existence of multiculturalism is to deny the right of diverse groups to express their identity. This argument suggests that to express the death or failure of multiculturalism is to deny lived reality, which is a denial of the recognition of the other that is also an over-determination of the idea of liberal tolerance in which everyone lives under (white) British cultural norms. In this case multiculturalism becomes an empty signifier for the attempt to reconcile difference. This idea becomes important when we think about multiculturalism’s displacement shortly after the 2001 riots. Here, we see that while it may be true that multiculturalism is a lived reality, it is always an incomplete project. This is because the reconciliation of difference to dominance cannot be resolved in a nation state that asserts the structural dominance of the white majority. The set of principles that encouraged community cohesion was therefore introduced to reunite difference with dominance. In this new discourse of national identity we can all be different as long as we adhere to what it means to be British. However, following the links made between terrorism and political Islam, this version of Britishness sees certain forms of difference as a threat to the security of the nation (Featherstone et al. 2010). It is in this reconciliation between difference and dominance that British Muslims became what Bataille (cited in Noys 2000) terms ‘the remainder’—because they did not match the ideals of liberal democracy. As soon as a remainder is created, media stories work to amplify difference through representation. This amplification of abject otherness was seen in the media discourses about parallel communities after the North of England riots and continues to work through more recent representations of Muslim radicalism.[[7]](#footnote-7) Evident in all of these stories is a narrative that sees Islam as an extreme form of identification that also works to legitimate the view of Britain as a liberal democracy.

This is what we see happening in Cameron’s 2011 speech. After years of debate about the appropriateness of multiculturalism to describe Britain, he finally provided a new term: ‘muscular liberalism’. Following the principles set out in the community cohesion agenda of the previous decade, Cameron’s version of muscular liberalism will accept difference as long as all citizens adhere to a certain set of rules. Moreover, his main assertion centers on the willingness of others to adopt core hegemonic values. This version of liberalism is ‘muscular’ precisely because it legitimates intolerance to those defined as intolerant to the British way of life. With this idea in mind, in the section below, I offer a consideration of the ways in which media workers might follow the principles of muscular liberalism to uphold dominant hegemonic discourses of liberal (in)tolerance that deny racism, while at the same time work to marginalize Muslims through their production practices.

**The Role of the Media Professional**

Situated within the context outlined in the sections above, the Muslims in the European Mediascape project sought to investigate the extent to which narratives of parallel lives, and indeed the existence of a parallel ‘Muslim’ media,[[8]](#footnote-8) might impact perceptions of Muslims, and relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, in the UK mediated environment. Following Deacon et al. (1999) the overall methodology was concerned to generate rich qualitative data that would throw light onto some of our central questions about media production practices and their impact on intergroup relations. A purposive sampling method was used to locate media professionals working in both mainstream and ‘Muslim’ media organizations. Interviews were divided between mainstream and ‘Muslim’ media categories, in an attempt to provide insight into commonalities and differences between mainstream and alternative media practices and attitudes. The interviews considered here include those with press and broadcast editors as well as reporters, documentary film-makers and online content contributors. The findings result from the analysis of 23 media producers working in mainstream organizations in the United Kingdom, in other words, organizations aimed at the whole community either nationally or locally. Participants in the study had been working in the industry between 2 and 40 years. There was a bias toward males (17:6), reflecting the make-up of the media industry itself (IWMF 2011). Eight participants in our study self-identified as ethnic minorities. This high percentage does not reflect the number of minorities working in the mainstream media industries, which remains significantly below the UK BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) population (New Statesman 2012). For the most part, representatives from the liberal media (e.g., *BBC*, *Guardian*, Channel 4 and independent media producers) responded to our approach.

*UK media environment*

Not only do mainstream media organizations continue to dominate the market share (Downey 2006), but our study reveals that despite the existence of employment policies aimed at encouraging equality and diversity in the workplace, media establishments remain largely what one producer termed ‘worryingly’ white, male and middle-class. Beyond purported tokenism in front of camera, minority producers working in the mainstream media also reported feeling marginalized or pushed toward special interest stories. Indeed, following the report into the representation of BME workers in media organizations (New Statesman 2012), which showed that minority groups made up only a tiny fraction of producers with regular columns, we could argue that the very composition of, and practices entrenched in the mainstream newsroom are guilty of prohibiting a fair and even reporting of events.

*Media representations of Muslims*

When asked their views about the quality and bias of stories relating to Muslims in Britain and the Islamic faith more generally, all participants acknowledged that negative representation existed. Unsurprisingly, the tabloid press was held up to particular scrutiny. For example, referring to his previous job at a national tabloid newspaper, one journalist stated that at the height of the anti-Muslim backlash after the terrorist attacks in London, ‘on an almost daily basis there would be a story about Muslims negatively in the paper [. . .] and it was certainly something that got good coverage in a way that no story about Jews or Sikhs or any other religion [did]’ (freelance producer). However, such ‘tabloid’ practices were not just limited to national newspapers, broadcasters were also accused of employing sensationalistic methods in order to bring in larger audiences.

Conveying a sense of the transition of discourses moving through multiculturalism to the more recent critical liberal position emphasized by the community cohesion agenda outlined above, others observed a more nuanced transformation to the representation of Muslims over the last ten years:

<block>When I started in the business there was a kind of complete disdain and ignorance. Then there was a great urge to go around saying sort of ‘Muslims are just like us and shouldn’t be misunderstood’. Which I would say was the late 90s zeitgeist [. . .] And then in the 2000s [. . .] there was a noticeable backlash against that stuff, with people, some of them of course Muslims, talking very violently and you know strongly against groups like Hizbut-Tahrir [. . .]. So I’d say yeah there have been three phases in the last 20 years, from ignorance, to a sort of uncritical and rather patronising welcome, and now to a more critical but less patronising view (national press producer). </block>

This view, from a media producer with over thirty years’ experience in the newspaper industry, highlights the media alignment to broader public sphere discourses previously outlined in the work of authors such as van Dijk (1996), Herman and Chomsky (2002) and Entman (2007). Indeed, all of the participants recognized that recently there had been a greater focus on Muslims in a national and international context, which, in the event of bad journalistic practices, could result in sensationalist coverage: ‘I think some of the press is just racism frankly’ (regional press producer). However, reflecting the view of the above authors on the production of hegemonic discourse, it was not only tabloid press and broadcasters that were under scrutiny. Here, one respondent expressed the view that ‘even in quite liberal newspapers like the *Guardian*, I think very often the way that the Muslims are spoken about is, I suppose, [as] a kind of homogenous body of opinion’ (national press editor). In this regard there was a widespread perception that coverage of events was context–dependent, and this often related back to who was covering the story, their knowledge and experience, the kind of access they had and what resources were available to them. In fact many participants felt that the representation of Muslims in good quality journalism demonstrated an awareness of the different Muslim voices and that it was up to media professionals to pursue best practice by making sure that all angles of a story were covered.

However, when asked to comment on a specific news story, the 2011 Cameron speech, there were mixed responses. Here, the views of producers were largely aligned with the ideological biases of the organizations for which they worked. For example one participant working for a right-wing broadsheet was largely uncritical of the political narrative of the event, and claimed that it more or less reflected the current state of race relations in the United Kingdom. In contrast, liberal broadsheet producers questioned this somewhat, and suggested that it had created headlines purely because of its poor timing and the way it coincided with the English Defence League march in London:

<block>The politics of the story got a little bit skewed by the question of ‘why this speech? Why now? Was it good judgement to deliver it?’ When actually, if you remember, the context was that the [Arab] Spring was really just going out of the way and there was some very difficult security and strategy questions to be asked about what was happening in the Middle East (national press producer). </block>

Nonetheless, despite reflecting on the timing of the story, there remained little criticism of its sociopolitical context, and this in turn followed the logic of the speech itself: that Britain is facing a security threat that must be addressed via policies that seek to shore up core British identifications. Similarly, when asked about the Arab Spring, participants tended to agree that there had been good quality neutral coverage of the events across the range of media in the United Kingdom. Indeed, many participants were keen to assert that it was not a Muslim story, but rather an international relations issue, with one producer stating that ‘religion has been surprisingly absent’ from the coverage (national press producer). Al-Jazeera was picked out as being particularly non-partisan and also globally influential in the coverage of the uprisings. In this instance there was a feeling that media coverage had helped reduce misconceptions about the Middle East. For example, Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the active role of women in the protests was said to have challenged the general view that Islam is a misogynistic religion.

Regardless of such positive affirmation of their industry’s coverage of events in the Middle East, participants from minority backgrounds noted that coverage in the mainstream media had overplayed aspects of the protests that asserted the dominance of liberal democratic ideals. Here, one self-identified minority journalist challenged the emphasis on the role of social media in the organization and development of the uprisings, perhaps ironically stating that ‘you know democracy movements in the past have happened; even at the time when there was no internet’ (national press producer). In support of this view, two participants, identified as white British, described the coverage as coming from a West-centric point of view. Again the tabloid and mid-market press were held up to scrutiny for scaremongering about the potential fallout of the uprisings in the midst of the positive coverage, by prompting questions such as, ‘“is the government there going to be even more fundamentalist than the one that has gone out”?’ (regional press producer). In doing so, they worked to reinforce suspicion about the growth of an Islamist state.

Notwithstanding the acknowledged problems with mainstream media representations, producers had reservations about the use of Muslim media outlets to redress the balance. In an interesting take on the parallel lives discourse a number of (white male) participants suggested that the introduction of alternative (faith-based) media was not worthwhile because of the sense that communities may ‘talk to themselves’ (national press producer). Here, participants suggested that the development of an alternative media might contribute further toward self-segregation. Producers also questioned whether Muslim media outlets were a useful resource for mainstream media when seeking additional/alternative views on a story, thus suggesting that ‘there’s scope for what I would term broadly as the Muslim media to up its game’ (national press producer). For some this was due to a lack of awareness about the existence of such organizations, ‘if there are these niche, erm, media for Muslims, apart from *Muslim News*, I’m certainly not aware of them’ (national press producer). Indeed two participants compared the development of the Muslim media in the 2000s unfavorably with the black press in the 1980s, stating that while black communities had used publications such as *The Voice* to present a strong anti-racist political narrative, the current Muslim media has failed to assert any influence in a competitive media marketplace. This process of delegitimatization was evident in many of the narratives presented and had the effect of maintaining dominant production norms and practices.

*Coverage within own organizations*

Following the work of authors such as Herman and Chomsky (2002), in general, participants aligned with the editorial lines of their organizations, which they believed presented a balanced, intelligent view about events that may relate to or resonate with Muslim communities. For the most part this also included minority producers working in the mainstream media (perhaps because of the aforementioned bias toward professionals working in liberal media). While coverage of major events negatively representing Muslims, such as 9/11 and 7/7, was mentioned, participants were keen to emphasize that they also presented ‘positive’ stories. In fact most producers in our sample felt that there had been no change or an improvement in representation of Muslims within their own organizations; for example, they stated that ‘there is much more awareness of the fact that Islam itself is not a monolithic religion and British Muslims are not a monolithic community’ (national press producer).

While this represents the general consensus among national media producers, perspectives deviated slightly among local/regional producers. This appeared to hinge upon whether the local community they represented had a significant Muslim population. For example, one local producer spoke of certain national issues not affecting their particular community: ‘we don’t have a Muslim or Islam population so it’s not something that would impact’ (local press editor). Another, representing a region where intercultural community tensions have run high in the past, stated that Muslims were not singled out for special treatment in their representation of community matters. This insistence that Muslims were treated like everyone else, that their faith was not part of the story, is perhaps an interesting reflection of the division between the local and national approach to a story. One local press producer acknowledged that while they would not shy away from a story that focused on Muslims, there were constraints on what could be reported due to local sensitivities. Here, they explained that care would be taken to ensure that representatives from local community groups were approached to provide a perspective on issues that were linked to Islam/Muslims.

*Impact of coverage on inter-group relations*

Although largely positive about their own organization’s production strategies, participants were unanimous in stating that media representations can impact negatively on inter-group relations. Here, the most pronounced difference related to the way that they perceived their role in, or responsibility for, this impact:

<block>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 (national press producer). </block>

We can perhaps refer to Entman’s (2007) work on framing, to unpack how producers from all sections of the mainstream media overwhelmingly believed that *they* engage in responsible journalism, with many insisting that they are careful not to frame a story in such a way that might inflame existing community tensions—locally, nationally or internationally. While all participants noted that they would not avoid reporting a story for this reason and stated that good journalism should engage all communities, there were differences of opinion between national and local producers about the effect or impact of the stories they wrote. Asserting the objectivity of the news reporter, national producers felt that their remit was to get to the ‘truth’ behind a story. In contrast, comments from local producers revealed a greater awareness of the tensions that might well play out on their doorstep as a result of insensitive reporting: ‘it’s a great responsibility to work for a newspaper, be it a local newspaper or a national newspaper, because you know that in some shape or form you are shaping the agenda’ (local press editor).

**Conclusion**

Although the data produced by this project can only provide a snapshot into the views and practices of media professionals in the United Kingdom, it does reveal that while there is no conscious racism in the views of media producers represented in the sample, they do recognize the partial composition of mainstream newsrooms, where organizations are dominated by white, middle-class men (New Statesman 2012). Following on from the arguments presented in the first two sections, this in itself reveals not individual racism, but rather the way that racialized discourses are constructed systematically through the stream of narratives that emerge from a particular perspective, but at the same time present themselves as neutral, objective and universal on the basis that they foreclose other voices at the very point of (media) production. This is particularly evident in the ‘denial of difference’ discourse that pervades the findings. Following the work of Herman and Chomsky (2002), we can see that by denying the particular identifications of the other—be it faith or ethnicity—media producers reinforce a dominant hegemonic view that undermines the identity of the subject and upholds the place of structural authority. So although media producers believe that they are fair, truthful and impartial, the way the news is organized—from people employed, sources used, and the way a story is framed—works to validate dominant hegemonic discourses. Arguably, it is precisely because our sample was dominated by producers working in liberal media organizations that we can see this hegemonic process in action. In much the same way that the current public sphere account of muscular liberalism constructs as deviant those who refuse to adhere to the norms of center-right politics, the media producers in our study characterized their organizations as liberally tolerant. That in itself is exclusive because it constructs the other—the object of discourse—as strange; the intolerant other so often portrayed in accounts of Islam. Here, I would argue that the mainstream media production practices highlighted in this paper mirror the dominant public discourse of the past decade, which has worked to dismantle the multiculturalist agenda that sought to accept difference and instead overwritten it with a narrative of integration that celebrates Britishness, while at the same time pushes to the margins of society those who fail to accept this story of liberal tolerance.

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**Biography**

Siobhan Holohan is Lecturer in Sociology at Keele University. Her previous work includes *The Search for Justice in a Media Age* (2005), studies on British multiculturalism after MacPherson, and constructions of Muslim identity in the British press. She is currently working on her second book, which traces the history of confession in western society.

1. The project, which ran from October 2010 to March 2012, was convened by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, and funded by The British Council and Vodafone Germany. A program of research was conducted simultaneously in the United Kingdom and Germany and included in-depth interviews with 72 media producers working in an array of mainstream and specialist organizations, and focus groups and survey data from 469 consumers based in four locations across the United Kingdom and Germany. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a consideration of Muslim media practices and audience responses, see Poole in this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. State multiculturalism refers to policies implemented by central government and local authorities to enable citizens from different cultural, ethnic and faith backgrounds to practice their beliefs and customs, for example, via the state sponsorship and funding of faith schools. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The riots took place between April and July 2001 in the northern towns of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford with lesser cited disturbances in Leeds and Stoke-On-Trent. Bagguley and Hussain (2003; 2008) suggest that a mix of factors contributed to the violence, including provocation from racist organizations and existing racial tensions brought about by long-standing structural inequalities in the areas affected. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Reports commissioned after the disturbances include the Denham Report (2001), the Ritchie Review (2001) and the Ousley Report (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Following definitions presented in the Runnymede Trust Report, South Asian is used here to refer to people from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In their study analysing 974 newspaper articles between 2000 and 2008, Moore, Mason and Lewis (2008) found that representations of Muslims had increased significantly. The emphasis on Islam as a problematic faith was at the core of their findings. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. After consultation with the media organizations in question, the concept of ‘Muslim’ media was used in the project as a positive shorthand expression to describe media organizations largely aimed at Muslim audiences. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)