

**The search for common ground**  
**Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media**

*A report commissioned by the Mayor of London*

*Executive Summary*

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## Executive summary

In 2006 the Greater London Authority (GLA) commissioned a study of media coverage of Islam and Muslims in the UK media. The study was co-ordinated by the Insted consultancy. It took place between 1 May 2006 and 30 April 2007 and involved:

- a review of recent opinion polls
- study of recent books and articles
- a survey of the news in one week
- consideration of stories about political correctness
- interviews with Muslim journalists
- analysis of a TV documentary.

The underlying questions for investigation were:

- Do the media promote informed debate about the building and maintenance of Britain as a multicultural society? Or do they oversimplify, giving insufficient information about the background to the news and pandering to readers' and viewers' anxieties and prejudices?
- How community-sensitive is media reporting about multiculturalism and British Muslim identities? Is it likely to foster anxiety, fear or hostility within particular communities – for example, in the views that non-Muslims have of Muslims, or that Muslims have of non-Muslims?
- Does media coverage hinder or promote mutual understanding? Does it increase or decrease a sense of common ground, shared belonging and civic responsibility?

### Findings and conclusions

The project found examples of good practice. These included: the decision by every British national paper not to reprint the caricatures about Islam created in Denmark in 2005 and widely published in 2006 in most other European countries; the exercise of responsibility after 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005; a range of one-off news items, features, projects and investigative articles. But in most though not all of the UK print media, and for most, though not all of the time, the project found that:

- 1 The dominant view is that there is no common ground between the West and Islam, and that conflict between them is accordingly inevitable.
- 2 Muslims in Britain are depicted as a threat to traditional British customs, values and ways of life.
- 3 Alternative world views, understandings and opinions are not mentioned or are not given a fair hearing.

- 4 Facts are frequently distorted, exaggerated or oversimplified.
- 5 The tone of language is frequently emotive, immoderate, alarmist or abusive.
- 6 The coverage is likely to provoke and increase feelings of insecurity, suspicion and anxiety amongst non-Muslims.
- 7 The coverage is at the same time likely to provoke feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims, and in this way to weaken the Government's measures to reduce and prevent extremism.
- 8 The coverage is unlikely to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of unlawful discrimination by non-Muslims against Muslims.
- 9 The coverage is likely to be a major barrier preventing the success of the Government's community cohesion policies and programmes.
- 10 The coverage is unlikely to contribute to informed discussion and debate amongst Muslims and non-Muslims about ways of working together to maintain and develop Britain as a multicultural, multifaith democracy.

### **Principal recommendations**

In the light of this report:

- 1 News organisations should review their coverage of issues and events involving Muslims and Islam, and should consider drawing up codes of professional conduct and style guides about use of terminology. Such codes of professional conduct should be based on their own best practice.
- 2 News organisations should take measures, perhaps within the framework of positive action in equalities legislation, to recruit more journalists of Muslim heritage who can more accurately reflect the views and experiences of Muslim communities.
- 3 News organisations should also consider how best to give Muslim staff appropriate professional support and to prevent them being pigeon-holed as specialists in minority issues rather than concerned with the full spectrum of an organisation's output.
- 4 Organisations, projects and programmes concerned with race relations should see and treat anti-Muslim prejudice as a form of discrimination, and as serious as other forms of discrimination.

- 5 The new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) should focus explicitly on, amongst other concerns, combating anti-Muslim prejudice, both in society generally and in the media in particular.
- 6 The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) should give a higher profile to combating anti-Muslim prejudice in the media and the general climate of public opinion.
- 7 News organisations should treat seriously complaints relating to distorted coverage of Islam and Muslims in the media.
- 8 Consideration should again be given to amending the Press Complaints Commission's (PCC) terms of reference so it can consider distorted and inaccurate coverage of groups and communities as well as of individuals, and can consider complaints from third parties.
- 9 Organisations and institutions concerned with education should give consideration to how they can develop a) critical media literacy and b) religious literacy in the programmes, courses and curricula that they provide.

(The report defines religious literacy as 'skills in understanding and assessing religious statements and behaviour; discerning the difference between valuable and harmful aspects of religion and religions; appreciating religious architecture, art, literature and music without necessarily accepting all the beliefs that they express or assume; and making reasonable accommodation between people holding different religious and non-religious worldviews.')

## **Chapter summaries**

### *Chapter 1: Common ground*

Do non-Muslims in Britain and the wider world see Islam as a threat, or is there a sense of common ground? Recent opinion polls in Britain and further afield suggest there has been a decline in optimism about the possibility of finding shared ground in recent years. However, Britain is more optimistic about finding common ground than many other countries – and there is particularly positive feeling about this in London.

Much is made of the alleged clash between Islam and the West. But is it really a clash of civilisations, cultures and religions – or are the key tensions political, related to power, territory and resources? Public opinion in Britain and several other countries largely supports the latter view, yet this is rarely mentioned in the media.

Media coverage of Muslim and Islam-related issues has often been a cause for concern. For example, in early 2007, a front-page story about a new publication from the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) was inaccurate and distorted. Judging by the tone and content of messages posted by the paper's readers on its website, the story caused much alarm, with anger and abuse directed at Muslims as a result. The messages showed that anxiety relating to Islam is mixed with fear about multiculturalism, so-called political correctness, and worries and uncertainties about British identity.

### *Chapter 2: A normal week?*

To explore the context and implications of representations of Islam and Muslims in the media, a study was made of the British press over the course of a week. The week beginning Monday 8 May 2006 was chosen at random about a month in advance. A count was made of every article mentioning 'Islam', 'Muslims', derivatives such as 'Islamic' and 'Islamist', and words and phrases with an obvious association with Islam, for example 'Sunni' and 'Shi'a'. On the basis of these criteria, 352 articles were identified. They were categorised according to type of paper, whether they were about domestic or international affairs, whether the context was negative, positive or neutral, and whether the articles expressed a sense of threat or crisis. The principal findings included:

- There were substantial differences between daily newspapers with regard to how many articles mentioning Islam or Muslims they contained during the week in question. There were just over 50 articles in the *Guardian*, over 40 in *The Times*, *Financial Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Independent*, but less than 20 in the *Sun*, *Mirror*, *Express* and *Star*.
- Tabloids and broadsheets differed not only in the amount of coverage they provided but also in whether they focused on domestic or international affairs. Close to 60 per cent of articles in tabloids pertained to Britain and 40 per cent to the wider world. In the case of the broadsheets, however, the proportions were the other way round: 60 per cent were about the wider world, and 40 per cent about Britain.
- Of the 352 articles that referred to Islam and Muslims during the week in question, 91 per cent were judged to be negative in their associations. Only four per cent were judged to be positive, and five per cent were judged neutral.
- In 12 of the 19 papers studied during the week there were no positive associations.
- In the tabloids, 96 per cent of all articles were judged to be negative, compared with 89 per cent in the broadsheets. It is relevant to bear in mind in this connection that the combined circulation of the

tabloids is about three times greater than that of the broadsheets (May 2007 figures).

- It was judged that almost half of the articles represented Islam as a threat. Of these, about a third pertained to Britain and two-thirds to the wider world.
- The overall picture presented in the media during the week in question was that on the world stage Islam is profoundly different from, and a serious threat to, the West; and that, within Britain, Muslims are different from – and a threat to – ‘us’.

### *Chapter 3: ‘Britishness is being destroyed’*

Recently, a theme has been developed in the British media that British society and the British way of life are under threat. Blame is often laid at the door of the pernicious influence of ‘political correctness’. Four newspaper stories expressing such views in relation to relatively trivial incidents were examined. The actual stories were:

- the alleged banning of piggy banks by a building society in a Lancashire town
- the alleged banning of Christmas by a local council in London
- the use of BP (Before Present) instead of BC (Before Christ) at a museum in the West country
- the Crown Prosecution Service taking a 10-year-old boy to court for playground insults in Salford.

Each story was shown to illustrate the claim that ‘common sense’ is being threatened by ‘the PC brigade’. More seriously, in the treatment of each story the attack on political correctness was combined with an attack on Muslims – either explicitly or implicitly. In fact, the reportage of all four incidents involved serious factual inaccuracies and distortions. These were uncovered by interviews with, and statements by, people who were directly involved.

The research concluded that many of the alleged signs of misplaced political correctness are unsubstantiated, even though real fears exist. These arise not from so-called political correctness, nor from the presence of Muslims in modern Britain, but from social and economic change, globalisation, and new international relationships.

### *Chapter 4: Being a journalist, being a Muslim*

If you’re of Muslim heritage, what’s it like to work as a reporter on a mainstream newspaper? Are you treated differently? Is there any opportunity to influence your paper’s policies and practices? Interviews with journalists from Muslim backgrounds revealed a wide range of

experiences and perceptions, told almost entirely in their own words. The interviews led to the conclusion that if media coverage of Islam and Muslims is to improve, there are practical advantages to the journalistic staff of newspapers more accurately reflecting the proportion of Muslims living in Britain, since:

- they are more likely to deal with Islam and Muslim-related issues with sensitivity, fairness and awareness of complexity
- they are more likely to establish a rapport and to win trust when dealing with Muslim members of the public
- they can advise and challenge colleagues, including senior editors, about the ways certain stories should and should not be covered
- they can have an impact on the organisational culture of the paper, making it more open-minded and self-critical.

It is important, however, that senior managers in news organisations should:

- understand that there is a wide range of opinion, outlook and practice amongst journalists of Muslim backgrounds, as with people of Muslim backgrounds more generally. For example, not all practise the religion, and no single individual should be treated as a representative or ambassador.
- recognise that journalists of Muslim backgrounds are professionally journalists who happen to be Muslims rather than Muslims who happen to be journalists
- resist pressures to limit people's career prospects by pigeon-holing and typecasting them into a narrow range of work.

### *Chapter 5: 'Full and fair debate'*

It is often the case that the media give the impression that people of Muslim heritage can be divided into two contrasting groups: good/bad, 'moderate'/'extremist', 'Sufi'/'Islamist'. There are many objections to this over-simplification. One danger is that it can lead to further simplification and ungrounded claims – for example that the term 'Muslim extremist' is largely tautologous (saying the same thing twice), and that 'moderate Muslim' is a contradiction in terms. This tendency was seen, for example, in reportage on the 'A Question of Leadership' episode of the television programme *Panorama*, broadcast on 21 August 2005.

The programme was about representation of British Muslims in two separate senses: a) how they are portrayed and b) how Muslim voices and views are presented to others, particularly the Government. The latter sense of 'representation' necessarily involves considering questions of leadership and management in umbrella organisations such as the Muslim

Council of Britain, and the roles and responsibilities of office-holders in such organisations. The producer of the programme called for ‘a full and frank debate’ about representation in the latter sense. Issues of who speaks for Muslims and who the Government should listen to are certainly of great importance and do need debating. This *Panorama* programme, however, did not facilitate or support the level of debate that is required.

### *Chapter 6: Histories, stories and Islamophobia*

What are the key issues to look for in any study of the representation of Muslims and Islam in the media? This chapter makes four distinctions:

- between two types of narrative: ‘histories’ and ‘stories’. Histories afford a meta-view of a situation, seeing it as part of a longer, ongoing narrative. Stories, on the other hand, are individual items in newspapers and on TV and radio.
- between content (what something says) and form (the way the subject is approached and engaged with)
- between dominant and alternative worldviews. For example, a dominant worldview might say ‘Muslims are a threat to non-Muslims’, whereas the alternative view might say ‘There are both real and perceived threats on both sides’.
- between open and closed forms of engaging, thinking, talking and writing. For example, one mark of engaging openly would be not deliberately distorting, or recklessly over-simplifying, incontestable facts.

The term ‘Islamophobia’ in its current sense was coined in about 1990. It can be a useful shorthand term for referring to coverage that:

- presents narratives about Islam and Muslims as threats at the same time as ignoring or misrepresenting alternative narratives
- does so with closed not open ways of thinking, talking and engagement
- is likely to increase insecurity and vulnerability amongst Muslims
- is likely also to provoke anxiety, fear and panic amongst non-Muslims
- is unlikely therefore to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of discrimination against Muslims
- is unlikely to contribute to an informed debate about ways of maintaining and developing Britain as a multicultural, multifaith democracy.

### *Chapter 7: Responsible journalism*

Where Islam is concerned, anxiety is the key issue, and the professional responsibility of journalists is to promote informed debate, as distinct from pandering to prejudice and provoking anxiety by being alarmist. An exemplary media response was shown in much of the coverage immediately after 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005.

How can responsible journalism be fostered? The principal themes to be considered include those listed below.

- Freedom of speech: there is an important distinction to be made between having a right and exercising it responsibly.
- Dealing with anxiety: could it be that the unsettling nature of rapid social and cultural change is the underlying cause of malaise and unease, rather than specific events or communities?
- Religious literacy: increased understanding is needed of the range of ways in which religion may affect a person's values and perspectives.
- Critical literacy: building up interpretative skills so the public can question media portrayals of issues and engage in debate.
- The making of complaints: the public needs to be encouraged to engage in debate, express opinion and complain to the Press Complaints Commission when the media go a step too far.
- Codes of professional practice to be developed to promote accountability in the media.

In the light of these discussions, the chapter makes the recommendations listed near the start of this summary.

### **Conclusion**

In March 2007 the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly, declared that 'we urgently need a new approach to tackling the violent extremism that seeks to undermine our society and this approach must be based as much on winning hearts and minds as on security measures'.

She said further that the Government 'must put a new emphasis on local solutions' and that 'our aim must be not just to stop people committing violence but also to challenge the ideologies that drive them'. She acknowledged that successive governments, including the present one, 'have not always got this balance right'. Governments have 'put too much faith in action,' she added, 'not enough in debate'.

The purpose of the debate, she continued, would be to challenge, isolate and neutralise 'ideologies of hatred' amongst 'a tiny minority' of Muslims. She drew an analogy with far right extremism – 'the British public rejects their ugly message'.

The stress on debate as well as on action was and is welcome. The mainstream media will have a major role to play in it. The debate in the mainstream media will be disingenuous, however, if it assumes that

hostility and suspicion towards Islam and Muslims are to be found only amongst a small minority of non-Muslims, the so-called far right.

There also needs to be substantial debate about prejudices and anxieties – sometimes amounting to panic – amongst many non-Muslims. This will have to include consideration of how the mainstream media are by no means always responsible in the ways in which they treat stories and issues concerning Muslims and Islam.

If they are to contribute constructively to the debate, the mainstream media must put their own house in order. They need to be supported, encouraged and empowered in this by their readers, viewers and users.

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