APPG Religion in the Media Inquiry into Religious Literacy Submission of Evidence

April 2020
The Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM) was set up in 2018 by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB).

Our aims are to:

▪ Create an evidence base on how Islam and Muslims are reported in national print and broadcast media.
▪ Develop insights on potential areas of improvement through evidence-based analyses, reports, and guidelines.
▪ Advocate change through constructive engagement with key stakeholders.
▪ Empower Muslim communities to proactively engage with the media and help change the narrative.

CfMM monitors and analyses thousands of articles and broadcast clips daily. Our monitoring methodology has been developed and approved by leading academics and experts in the field of corpus linguistics. CfMM is recognised as an authority in this field and a valuable resource by all stakeholders, including the media, regulators, politicians, and community organisations.

CfMM works closely with editors and journalists from the national print and broadcast media to highlight inaccuracies, generalisations and misrepresentations of Muslims and Islam in the media as well as promote good practice and increase Religious Literacy. We hold roundtables and “Meet The Media” events between media executives and community organisations. We deliver media skills training, publish evidenced-based reports, sit on advisory boards, and make submissions to inquiries and consultations such as OFCOM’s Thematic Review of Representation and Portrayal on the BBC, the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines Consultation, the Editor’s Code Review, and the Lords Select Committee Inquiry on the Future of Journalism. CfMM was also part of IPSO’s working committee, inputting into developing guidelines for journalists on the reporting of Islam and Muslims.

CfMM welcomes the opportunity to respond to this important inquiry. Our submission below relies on our evidence base from monitoring both print and broadcast media. We will answer all the questions posed in the inquiry but will go into greater detail on the effects of religious illiteracy. This section will give examples from both print and broadcast media which illustrate perceptions, falsehoods and the impact of ‘Religious Illiteracy’ when reporting on Islam and Muslims. Appendix 1 gives more examples of poor and inaccurate reporting of Islam and Muslims.
1. What do you understand by the term ‘religious literacy’?

   1.1. ‘Religious literacy’ is a contested term with various degrees of assumed knowledge attached to it. Scholars or academics are likely to have a greater understanding of the basic building blocks of religious beliefs, their terms, symbols, practices, and so on; an unrealistic goal for most journalists and media practitioners. However, as an estimated 85% of the world’s population identify with a religious group, it is incumbent upon media professionals to have a basic understanding of different beliefs, their significance in peoples’ lives, how they manifest, and the social, historical and cultural forces that shape the experiences of religious groups. 

   1.2. ‘Religious illiteracy’ in the media may be an unintentional misunderstanding of religious concepts, both in actual linguistic definitions and when reported on outside of their normally accepted context vis a vis revelation or traditional practice. However, as this submission will illustrate, certain media outlets and commentators, particularly those on the right, have a record of wilful misrepresentation of Muslims, Islamic concepts, and Islamic history. 

   1.3. ‘Religious literacy’ requires media practitioners to respect the beliefs of others, even if they disagree with them, treat them in a non-judgemental, nuanced way and not interpret them from a Eurocentric perspective.

2. What effect does a lack of religious literacy have on broadcast and/or print media?

   2.1. Media professionals and organisations have a huge influence on the public perception of religions, communities, and their role in the public domain. If a journalist does not understand the religion they are covering, or how to communicate the ideas effectively, they are more likely to disseminate false information. This creates a cycle of ignorance, false narratives, and stereotypes as well as inaccurate, generalised and misleading interpretations.

   2.2. Since 9/11, Muslims have arguably been the most consistently misunderstood and demonised community in the media. Islam and Muslims have been largely reported on within conflict paradigms and portrayed as the “other” to be feared.

   2.3. Whilst some of the most reprehensible anti-Muslim bigotry and religious illiteracy documented by the Centre for Media Monitoring has been in print (especially in tabloids, the
right-leaning press and religious publications), broadcast media also falls short in its representations of Islam and Muslims.

2.4. Even the BBC, our national broadcaster, which has strict editorial policies and rigorous fact-checking mechanisms, sometimes reports mistruths or inaccurate information normally associated with a partisan press.

2.5. Below are a couple of examples which help illustrate this.

I. BBC presenters failed to challenge author Asne Seierstad when she promoted her new book “Two Sisters”. She equates signs of radicalisation to when the girls, “started to dress differently and started to pray 5 times a day”.\(^1\) This conflating of everyday religious practice as signifiers of extremism or radicalisation is reductionist and dangerous. Presenters and Journalists should have the basic required knowledge of Muslim everyday practice so that such assertions can be challenged and corrected.

II. Similarly, in a piece on ‘The young Turks rejecting Islam,” the writer features an individual who says, “Until recently, I would not even shake hands with men.” Even though the individual being profiled doesn’t suggest allude to radicalism, the writer equates this normal practice, whereby many Muslims avoid shaking hands with the opposite gender, to that of a “radical believer of Islam.”\(^2\)

2.6. Other examples of ‘Religious Literacy’ can be more innocuous, yet still incorrect. In an article in INews, the author is attempting to explain the Islamic calendar and says, “Many Muslims take the time to fast as they would on Eid ul Fitr.” This might have been an oversight on the part of the author but editorially this incorrect fact was not spotted. Eid ul Fitr is the 1\(^{st}\) day of the month of Shawwal, directly after Ramadan. It is forbidden to fast on this day\(^3\), yet this basic fact about Islam is unknown by the author or the sub-editor.

2.7. Centre for Media Monitoring’s “State of Media Reporting on Islam and Muslims” quarterly report (Oct-Dec 2018) found that:

- 59% of all articles analysed associated Islam and Muslims with negative behaviours
- Over 1/3\(^{rd}\) of all articles misrepresented or generalised about Islam and Muslims
- 37% of articles in right-leaning and religious publications were “Very Biased”
- Terrorism was the most recurring theme in the media relating to Muslims and Islam
- Television drama proportionately misrepresented Muslims and Islam the most\(^4\)

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1 https://twitter.com/miqdaad/status/975731179138805760?lang=en
2 https://eur04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bbc.co.uk%2Fnews%2Fworld-europe-43813745&data=02%7C01%7C%7C893a0644a83a1106d57305c0%7C84df5e76964aaf935aaaadaa%7C1%7C0%7C636686709450040249&an dstate=Mbf8kNHSTwuQ3NO%2BpswA2V1kpgulpXODW8qOLym3k%3Dandreserved=0
2.8. In December 2019, the outgoing chair of IPSO, Sir Alan Moses, admitted that: “The portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the British press has been “the most difficult issue” facing the press watchdog in the past five years. He said: “I speak for myself, but I have a suspicion that [Muslims] are from time to time written about in a way that [newspapers] would simply not write about Jews or Roman Catholics.”

2.9. Given that the majority of the British public say what they know about Islam comes from the media, and that “the media” is to blame for the prejudice Muslims face in daily life in Britain, the importance of ‘religious literacy’ in the media is paramount. Without it, Muslim communities will continue to be misrepresented and experience increased hostility, suspicion, and hate crimes.

3. Common False Tropes around Islam and Muslims

3.1. The lack of ‘religious literacy’ in the media can lead to far-right tropes and conspiracy theories embedding themselves in the psyche of many Britons:

- 52% believe Islam (not fundamentalist groups) poses a threat to Western liberal democracy
- 32% believe there are “no-go areas in Britain where Sharia law dominates and non-Muslims cannot enter”
- 18% believe “Muslim immigration to this country is part of a bigger plan to make Muslims a majority of this country’s population”
- 35% of children agreed or partly agreed that “Muslims are taking over our country”.

3.2. The following are some of the most common tropes and narratives around Islam and Muslims: Muslims are barbaric; Islam is inherently violent; Islam is a threat to the West; Islam is monolithic; Islam is intolerant of other religions; Islam is inherently anti-Semitic; Islam is oppressive to women.

- Muslims are barbaric

A running narrative in the media is the belief that the so-called ‘Muslim culture’ is uncivilised, barbaric, and less-advanced than the ‘West’. This is articulated via several blind generalisations, in particular the supposed interchangeability between ‘Islam’, ‘Muslim’, and ‘Arab’; categories which are both distinct and internally heterogeneous. In conjunction with this, the media often poses the ‘West’ as being progressive and ‘liberal’,

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6 https://www.ft.com/content/60d5bee6-1f9f-11ed-bfa1-584213ee7b36
8 March 2018 “A Review of survey research on Muslims in Britain”, Ipsos MORI, pp.80
11 https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2018/12/14/brexit-and-trump-voters-are-more-likely-believe-co
12 https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/may/19/most-children-think-immigrants-are-stealing-jobs-schools-study-shows
while Muslim-majority, particularly Arab, countries are positioned as being both backward and ‘conservative’. The underlying assumption of such claims is that individual liberalism is morally superior, while conservatism (when referenced to refer to Muslim society and culture) is somewhat barbaric.

- **Islam is inherently violent**

  One of the most common tropes about Muslims is that they have a unique penchant for violence or that Islam encourages it. This narrative is often reinforced by media coverage which primarily reports on Muslims in the context of violence and terrorism. ‘Religious illiteracy’ when it comes to reporting on terrorism has resulted in inconsistencies, and the pre-conceived correlations between the faith, identity, and background of the perpetrator and how their crime is reported.

  This is evident when comparing attacks of a very similar nature. Plotters and attackers inspired by white supremacist ideology and who practise a certain faith are all too often given a terrorism free pass with no mention of their religion. This inconsistency is reinforced by the disproportionate application of the term “lone wolf” to non-Muslim terror suspects, despite their involvement in wider networks. Their mental health is also frequently called into question. This lends credence to the argument that Muslim suspects function in networks, while non-Muslims assailants are mentally ill mavericks, and therefore a lesser threat to wider society.

  Bound up with this narrative is the idea that the more religious a person becomes the more violent he/she is likely to become. The demand for Muslims to condemn violence committed by other Muslims assumes that Islam, at its core, must be about violence.

  1. An article in The Telegraph shows Charles Moore implying that violence on behalf of Muslims is firstly ‘systematic’ and not explainable by other factors, and secondly inconsistent with European culture. His argument is a clear example of the blind subjectivity and selective nature of anti-Muslim tropes, evident in his suggestion that i) Muslims are generally violent, ii) Europeans are generally peaceful, iii) anti-Jewish violence (as an example of ‘Islamist’ antagonism) is specifically symptomatic of Muslim violence in an otherwise peaceful Europe. This final point exposes the deep irony of his argument; his failure to recognise the historical treatment of Jews by Europeans.12

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II. The Iain Dale show on LBC on 15 April 2019 gives another example of how revisionist history is used to misrepresent history and drive home anti-Muslim sentiment based on the caller being a student of Indian history.

Caller: “British oppression in India was oppressive, but it was gentlemanly and civilised, the British didn’t go around smashing Hindu and Sikh Temples and abducting women and trying to convert people by force to Islam….. India was ruled by 600 years of Muslim rule, there was a holocaust of Hindus under that rule.”

The presenter concedes he has no knowledge of the issue and allowed for the caller to claim that “there was a genocide in India”, another fabrication pushed mainly by followers of Hindutva ideology who have supported the ruling BJP party and its ongoing suppression and attacks on Indian Muslims. None of this was challenged by the presenter nor was he in any position to do so. There was also no follow up with a historian or expert on Indian history to clarify the facts. This leaves the Presenter open to accusations of enabling mistruths to be peddled, which in turn may be used by extremists and revisionists to promote contrived readings of history and religion.

- **Islam is a threat to the West**

Islam and Muslims are constantly depicted in the media as being an existential threat to the West, through ideas such as the conspiracist ‘replacement theory’, which appropriates and exaggerates the visibility of Muslim practice in society and its embodiment in sharia councils, mosques, garments, etc., to envision an impending cultural takeover. The distinguishing trait of such illusions is their dependence on half-truths, which are often more dangerous than lies in that they are less susceptible to scrutiny.

The far-right trope about the supposed “Islamisation of Europe” is another growing trend in media coverage. An example of this can be found in a news report from Christian Today which quotes a bishop discussing an “Islamic invasion”, and claiming that “Europe is being Islamized”.14 The use of the term “creeping” to describe Islam is typically negative and provocative. Throughout the article, no alternative voice is sought and there is no scrutiny

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13 [https://app.criticalmention.com/app/#/report/a02c16d9-1a5a-4185-9190-b394b06be6e2](https://app.criticalmention.com/app/#/report/a02c16d9-1a5a-4185-9190-b394b06be6e2)

of his claims, even though Pew Research shows that by 2050 the Muslim population in Europe will most likely increase to just under 7.5% (without migration) of the total from a 2017 figure of just under 5%.

- **Islam as monolithic**

Though usually not stated explicitly, Islam (and the world’s Muslim population of 1.8 billion people) is often treated as monolithic. One way the given anti-Muslim tropes are both communicated and inflated is through the application of overarching and generalised terms, such as ‘Islam’, ‘Muslims’, ‘Middle East’, and ‘Sharia’, to imply homogeneity. Statements such as ‘Muslims believe x’ and ‘Islam promotes y’ serve sensationalised media coverage at the expense of accuracy and fair representation.

Of greater concern is their effect of erasing diversity amongst Muslims, as well as the respective voices, concerns, and ambitions of varying Muslim individuals and groups. A column piece in The Sun by Trevor Kavanagh, while he was on the board of IPSO, which refers to ‘The Muslim Problem’, (akin to how the Nazis referred to ‘The Jewish Problem) is not only sinister but also illustrates the belief that Muslims are a homogenous group.

- **Islam is intolerant of other religions**

Muslims are also portrayed as being in a religiously mandated, existential conflict with those of other faiths, particularly Christians and Jews. Singling out instances of Muslim aggression, this narrative ignores mainstream Islamic teachings, evidence of interreligious coexistence both past and present, and wrongs committed by other faith groups. Perhaps most prevalent is the notion that Muslims are anti-Semitic and that Islamic scripture validates such anti-Semitism.

This is commonly articulated via the narrative that ‘Muslims are intolerant’; clearly illustrated in an example from the Times in which Melanie Phillips argues ‘both secular and Muslim zealots are displaying [intolerance] from opposite viewpoints’ destroying ‘authentic Western culture’\(^\text{15}\). The implication is that ‘Western culture’ is neutral and

\(^{15}\) [https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/schools-are-becoming-a-battle-of-the-zealots-n2vd9gsr](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/schools-are-becoming-a-battle-of-the-zealots-n2vd9gsr)
tolerant; vulnerable to a supposed Muslim threat, an argument rooted in white-supremacist and conspiracist thought.

An article in The Times with the headline “Muslims ‘should share respect’ for Jesus with Christmas cheer”\(^1\) was just one of a number in right-leaning publications that appeared over the 2018 Christmas period portraying Islam and Muslims as being antagonistic towards Christmas and “disrespectful” towards Jesus, despite Jesus being revered as a holy prophet in the Quran. Interestingly, this negative coverage was counter-balanced in some left-leaning publications like The Guardian, which carried a piece on “Church welcomes its special Muslim visitors on Christmas Eve”,\(^1\) as well as the BBC’s article on “Muslim families donating to food banks for Christmas”.\(^1\)

- **Islam is inherently anti-Semitic**

The idea that Muslims are anti-Semitic, and that Islamic scripture validates such anti-Semitism is widespread in the media. These claims are often substantiated by references to the conflict between Israel and Palestine; whereby support for Palestine is equated to a desire to destroy the Jewish homeland in Israel, and as such constitutes anti-Semitism. The Times columnist, Melanie Philips claims that ‘Al Quds’ the Arabic term for the City of Jerusalem and meaning the Holy Land is “Islamic shorthand for the extinction of Jewish peoplehood.”\(^1\)

The Sunday Times, as well as commentators in the Spectator magazine, have reported that the Jews were slaughtered by the Prophet Muhammad,\(^2\) that Muslim society at the time of the Prophet was specifically hostile to local Jewish communities, and that such anti-Semitism has maintained an enduring legacy throughout Muslim belief and practice.\(^3\)

A simple reading of history easily disproves such narratives. William Montgomery Watt, a historian who wrote extensively about Islam says, “Khaybar was the battle which took place between the Prophet and the Jews who had for years continually encouraged attacks against the Prophet and his people in Medina. After being defeated, many Jews continued to live in Khaybar to farm their date orchards.”\(^4\) To simply render a battle as

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\(^1\) Jason Allardyce, Muslims ‘should share respect’ for Jesus with Christmas cheer, The Sunday Times 2018 (Accessed on 09-Dec-2018)

\(^2\) 24-Dec-2018, Harriet Sherwood, Church welcomes its special Muslim visitors on Christmas Eve, guardian.co.uk

\(^3\) https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-46623082


\(^5\) [https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/solving-gaza-crisis-is-easy-focus-on-living-not-killing-b6qzr3psi](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/solving-gaza-crisis-is-easy-focus-on-living-not-killing-b6qzr3psi)

\(^6\) R. Liddle [2016], “I know who I’m supporting in the Corbyn-Hodge leadership contest” (The Spectator) available: http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2016/05/i-know-who-im-supporting-in-the-impending-corbyn-hodge-leadership-contest/

\(^7\) William Montgomery Watt, Muhammad at Medina (Oxford 1953) pp.212
slaughter and frame early Muslims as being ‘hostile’ to Jews by excluding the context is dishonest and inaccurate journalism.

- **Islam is oppressive to women**

A common depiction of Islam and Muslims in the media is that Islam advocates for the oppression of women, facilitated by a willingness on behalf of Muslim men and resignation on behalf of Muslim women. This is commonly articulated via a superficial and presumptuous focus on traditional Muslim dress; whereby face or head coverings like the hijab are viewed as manifestations of this oppression, a debate which typically fails to consider the views of Muslim women themselves. In contrast, when nuns are reported on, their attire, which includes modest clothing and head-coverings similar to the hijab, is never referenced as problematic. The conflation of Muslim practice with broad cultural norms is also problematic, whereby certain gender-related norms, such as arranged marriage and male guardianship, are positioned as being both exclusively Islamic, and applicable to Muslims generally. This fails to acknowledge the cultural relativity of such norms, which span a variety of faiths, as well as the diversity of practices and lifestyles amongst the world’s Muslims.

In a crime documentary on Channel 5 about the murder of a young man by an ex-girlfriend, the religious background of the girl and the strictness of her home life, are repeatedly mentioned. The murder was a case of domestic violence by a jealous, insecure, jilted lover and had nothing to do with her faith. However, the documentary kept emphasising that: “Hasna Begum was from a strict Muslim background and lived with her parents at their home in east London”

4. **Language and Terminology**

4.1. Language and terminology are an intrinsic part of religious literacy. As the BBC acknowledges in its guidelines: “different words cause different degrees of offence in different communities as well as in different parts of the world. A person’s age, sex, education, employment, faith, nationality, and where they live, may all have an impact on whether or not they might be offended.”

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23 Murdered by, Channel5, CH5, 20-Nov-2018, 23:25PM BST
24 BBC Draft Editorial Guidelines, Section 5, Harm and Offence, Language 5.3.20
4.2. Editorial decisions are made to determine the right words and terminology to use for specific recurring issues. These should follow the principles of academic veracity, comprehension by the wider audience, and consistency. However, the Centre for Media Monitoring has observed hundreds of problematic terms relating to Islam and Muslims which are widespread amongst the media. These are either used inaccurately or misleadingly and include terms such as ‘Islamic terrorism’, ‘Islamist’, ‘Islamic State’, ‘Jihadi’, ‘Allahu Akbar’, ‘Sharia Law’, ‘Taqiyya’, ‘Da’wah’ and ‘Muslim grooming gangs’.

- **“Islamic terrorism”** – The term creates an unreasonable link between Islam and terrorism insinuating there is religious legitimacy when in fact terrorism is not sanctioned by Islam.

- **“Islamist”** – Technically an “advocate of running the government following their understanding of Islamic law”, its usage has moved to a specifically more derogatory meaning “advocate of militancy or fundamentalism linked to Islam”, blurring the line between non-violent political groups, and violent groups.

- **“Islamic State”**: The term creates an unreasonable link between Islam and the terror group despite leading Muslim jurists and scholars outrightly rejecting Daesh as an Islamic organisation. Furthermore, the use of this term is inconsistent as the English translation of other organisations such as Al Qaeda (The Base), Taliban (The Students), Hizbullah (Party of God) are never used.

- **“Jihadi”**: The words ‘jihadi’ and ‘jihadist’ are used without much consistency and have become shorthand for ‘terrorist’ when the suspect is Muslim. **Jihad**, which is a classical Arabic term meaning ‘to struggle to one’s utmost’ has no bearing to the meaning of terrorism or terrorist.

- **“Allahu Akbar”**: The phrase, which is used by billions of Muslims worldwide at least five times a day in prayer, is also a core part of their daily vernacular. The constant reference by the media to “Allahu Akbar” in the context of terrorism has conflated the phrase with acts of terrorism and assigned an ordinary Islamic phrase a negative connotation.

- **“Sharia Law”**: The term “Sharia” has been reduced to ‘corporal punishment’ and is used as shorthand for archaic and brutal practices. “Sharia Law” is used in a narrative of encroachment in line with far-right tropes which suggest that the British legal system...
and its values are under threat from a parallel legal system, when in fact in this country it is normally utilised in domestic family matters by consent and is subservient to civil as well as criminal law of the U.K.

- “Taqiyya”: This concept, which has been used by far-right terrorists like Anders Breivik to claim that Muslims are commanded to deceive for Islam, has been appearing far more frequently in mainstream media recently. Melanie Philips, alongside Gavin Mortimer, has penned entire articles claiming Muslims practice “taqiyya”. Yet as H.A. Hellyer states “Taqiyya is, after all, a concept that is fairly easily fact-checked and the practice whereby an individual may be less than fully truthful, when such an individual is reasonably afraid that the consequences of being fully truthful may place him or her into serious jeopardy by an oppressor, is hardly a controversial principle. In English law, for example, the doctrine of necessity is a defence for any accused.” In Judaic law, the principle of pikuach nefesh upholds the preservation of life over virtually any other obligation. To appropriate this nuanced Arabic term “taqiyya” as ammunition against Muslims displays the conspiracist tendency to fabricate an overarching judgement from context-specific information.

- “Da’wah”: The word "Da’wah" simply means invitation or call, like an invitation to dinner, or a call to submit papers. In a religious context, da’wah means to call people to Islam, by teaching anyone interested in God, the Qur’an, or Mohammad (PBUH). Observant Muslims believe the best form of da’wah is to set an example to society of how to live with ethics and principles. It is often argued that da’wah is as much about conveying the message and correcting people's misconceptions about Islam, as it is about convincing people to convert. However, “Da’wah” has been misconstrued by Niall Ferguson who writing in The Times says, “As my wife, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, argues in a powerful new report, jihad is always preceded by dawa — the process of non-violent but toxic radicalisation that transforms the petty criminal into a zealot.” The idea that “Da’wah” sets out to convert people to Islam contradicts the Qur’an, which states clearly, “There is no compulsion in religion. Truth is clear from falsehood.” The meaning here is clear: Muslims are told that truth is clear, so present the truth, but people will choose whether to accept the message or not.

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25 https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/islamists-are-not-the-same-as-other-prisoners-tpl52oxadt
27 https://www.abc.net.au/religion/taqiyya-are-muslims-commanded-to-deceive/11771648
28 https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/niall-ferguson-ws2fxqcpn
29 Surah Al Baqarah verse 256
Muslim “Grooming Gangs”: Despite “grooming gang” not being a legal category, there is widespread usage of it in the media when linked to Muslim men suggesting that there is a link between the actions of a few criminals with the religion of Islam when in fact their actions are anti-religious.

5. Opinion and Comment Journalism

5.1. Opinion and comment pieces in certain publications have far too often given journalists and writers the liberty to propagate inaccurate, misleading, and blatantly racist views while hiding behind the cloak of opinion, humour, and satire. Racism is sometimes articulated in subtle and restrained ways but can be more explicit. Establishment figures like Rod Liddle have referred to Muslims as “savages”30 and to ‘Islamic’ countries as “hellholes”31. Melanie Phillips promotes a fear of an ideological takeover writing that “The Islamists, or jihadis, are intent upon snuffing out individual freedom and imposing a totalitarian regime of submission to a religious dogma which erodes and then replaces British and Western Values”.32 She claims that churches are being replaced by mosques, that people can’t find a local butcher selling pork and are being intimidated by ‘local youths declaring ‘this is a Muslim area’. Conspiratorial theories share the characteristic that a minority is threatening the majority status quo, without providing any evidence. The likes of James Delingpole and Douglas Murray have also echoed the sentiments of far-right white supremacists and their theories of white populations gradually being replaced by non-white migrants and Muslims.

5.2. The transition of racist and xenophobic beliefs like these from the unregulated corners of the web to mainstream political discourse is of serious concern. It is contribut to the rehabilitation of the reputations of such far-right figures both domestically and in Europe, as well as in the States. Commentators have been given license to dehumanise Muslims and promote conspiracies of Islam on the grounds of promoting unfashionable views or uncovering a great underlying threat that is ignored by those in power. Views expressed in opinion pieces by establishment figures and publications give them credence and legitimacy which are then used by the far-right to legitimise their views by sharing opinion pieces with millions of people on the internet.

31 R. Liddle (2010), “After all the fuss, will anything actually change” (The Spectator) available online at: https://www.spectator.co.uk/2010/05/after-all-the-fuss-will-anything-actually-change/
32 M. Phillips (2009), “Clash of uncivilisations” (The Spectator) available online at: https://www.spectator.co.uk/2009/10/the-clash-of-uncivilisations/
6. When, where, and how is religious literacy learnt?

6.1. For the public, the media is one of the main sources of information on religion. However, given that the coverage about religion is generally poor and inconsistent, it is a less reliable source. According to Roger Bolton, the presenter of BBC Radio 4’s Feedback, “As for journalists, they are a largely secular metropolitan crew, and they cannot, therefore, understand what motivates people of other faiths and, by extension, cannot help the public to understand.”\(^{33}\) Paul Valley, an award-winning international reporter goes further by saying, “Our media are not only religiously illiterate, but proud of it.”\(^{34}\) Given that people from within the industry are saying this, it shows the need for more resources and training to equip journalists to make faith part of the vocabulary of modern journalism.

6.2. This is all the more important given that journalists and media organisations often share information, relying on the work and practices of their peers. Many examples exist of similar headlines and details appearing across news websites, the assumption being that the originator of the article will have fact-checked all the relevant details. This is a common practice among right-leaning tabloids looking for clickbait headlines. However, the assumption that broadsheets are sources of honest, fact-checked reporting has been allayed through high profile cases of misreporting and libel against individuals specifically from right-leaning broadsheets.

- The Times front-page story “Christian child forced into Muslim foster care”.\(^{35}\) IPSO upheld a complaint and ruled the Times "distorted" its coverage of a five-year-old Christian girl who was placed with Muslim foster carers and breached clause 1 of the editors’ code of practice.\(^{36}\)
- Daily Telegraph online had to publish an apology and correction after wrongly reporting that the police were investigating Ahammed Hussain, the Leader of the Scout Group at the Lewisham Islamic Centre. The Telegraph claimed he had segregated the Scout group by gender, in breach of the Scouts Association rules, and had promoted Muslim values and extremist views to scout members in ways that contradicted the Scouts commitment

\(^{33}\) [https://www.google.com/search?q=roger+boltonandrls=1C1SQJLEnGB801G8807andoq=roger+boltonandaq=chроме.69i57446j05.4618j07andsoucr=ichromeandie=UTF-8]
\(^{34}\) [https://www.leeds.anglican.org/content/encouraging-religious-literacy-media-debate]
\(^{35}\) [https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/christian-child-forced-into-muslim-foster-care-by-tower-hamlets-council-3gcp6l8cs]
\(^{36}\) [https://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=20480.17]
to British values and gave rise to safeguarding concerns. The newspaper had to pay him damages and costs.

- The Times had to apologise and pay damages to an imam who questioned the Conservative leadership candidates about Islamophobia during a televised BBC debate in June 2019. The Times falsely accused him of having anti-Semitic and extremist views.37

6.3. Sometimes due to the commercial pressures and the need to attract readers, the use of simplistic shared meanings to convey complex issues for audiences is common practice. The danger of this is that once these words, terms, and concepts are repeated over time, the misrepresentation embeds itself into social consciousness, and becomes an industry-wide practice. At a debate to encourage ‘religious literacy’ in the media, Dr Mercy Ette, Director of Journalism at Huddersfield University, gave the example of Boko Haram and questioned what was really known about them in the Western world. She said, “They became the Taliban of Nigeria, their Al Qaida; it made sense to use those terms we as an audience already understand; those terms are not neutral.”38

6.4. Similarly, the term “Sharia” has been reduced to ‘corporal punishment’ in Western media, shorthand for archaic, brutal practices. The myth for example that Sharia councils operate a parallel legal system has been made by commentators on television39 and in newspaper columns and has gone unchallenged despite being false.40 As Dr Mercy says, “Being literate about religion is critical if journalists are to write intelligently about crucial issues. We live in a world that is very diverse on issues to do with religion and unless our journalists understand the issues, then all they will talk will be the versions they know.”41

7. What effect does religious illiteracy have on decisions journalists make when assigning, researching, and reporting news stories?

7.1. The world of journalism is less diverse than the population as a whole and is, therefore, more likely to fall into the trap of perpetuating common misconceptions, stereotypes, and false narratives without understanding where they come from and how to avoid them. Stories that are deemed important by certain faith groups or minority communities can often be overlooked by decision-makers and journalists, 94% of whom are white42 and only 0.4% of

37 https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/corrections-and-clarifications-5phnn0xh2
38 https://www.leeds.anglican.org/content/encouraging-religious-literate-media-debate
39 https://app.criticalmention.com/app#/clip/view/0cef8016-473e-4b73-9a15-4f24ac96eed?token=f16a58bb-bc8-4b11-bd4f-34c0366790d9
40 https://fullfact.org/law/uks-sharia-courts/
41 https://www.leeds.anglican.org/content/encouraging-religious-literate-media-debate
42 https://www.nctj.com/downloadlibrary/DIVERSITY%20JOURNALISMS%20WEB.pdf
whom are Muslim. Challenging this cycle of ignorance as well as decisions made in high-level editorial meetings can be a daunting task as many Muslim and BAME journalists will attest.

7.2. Religious illiteracy results in simplistic, un-nuanced approaches and interpretations of stories. Communities and religious groups are looked upon as homogenous. Limited time, resources, and contacts within Muslim communities result in an over-reliance on familiar sources or “gatekeepers” many of whom are not representative in their views of broader Muslim communities.

7.3. Many broadcast journalists and presenters on topical or live debate programmes are often ill-equipped to challenge individuals from the far right or Islamophobia industry who are given a platform. Their views and backgrounds are not introduced properly to the audience, their interjections are not pre-empted or challenged due to a lack of religious literacy, and academics or scholarly experts are not invited to be counter voices.

7.4. Religious illiteracy also results in faith being mentioned when it is not the motivating factor in the story being covered. Words such as Muslim, Islamic, halal, Shari a, Allahu Akbar, etc all get mentioned in headlines for clickbait purposes even when that detail is irrelevant such as the mention of a “Halal-friendly meat merchant” in the headline of a story about a multi-million-pound drugs raid. The mentioning of a person’s faith is particularly prevalent in the reporting of terrorism.

7.5. In a report on “How the British Media Reports Terrorism”, due to be released soon by CfMM, we found that words identifying Muslims or Islam are more frequently placed alongside terror, terrorism or terrorist(s) in comparison with the most frequent identifiers of far-right, neo-Nazi or white supremacists who carry out acts of terror.

7.6. Geopolitics or disputes over land are also often presented as religious conflicts. A video uploaded to Facebook by one of Donald Trump’s lawyers, claiming that 60,000 Christians were killed by nomadic Muslim herdsmen in Central Nigeria since 2001, was the source of some stories in Christian Today and the Daily Express. An AFP FactCheck showed claims about the death toll and underlying issues were unverified and unreliable.

8. **What methods can be used by journalists to engage with faith groups sensitively?**

8.1. **Building Trust:** Given that a lot of the media coverage about Muslims and Islam is problematic, there is a lack of trust between Muslims and the media. For journalists to engage with or get access to a broader range of Muslims communities they need to rebuild that trust. That can only be done through open-mindedness, respect, and a genuine willingness on the part of journalists to start with a clean slate.

8.2. **Research and Outreach:** Media outlets need to change the current narrative and invest in their journalists to do the necessary research and groundwork, as journalists traditionally did before the internet, by picking up the phone, contacting people, meeting them, finding out what their organisations are doing, how communities are living, what their concerns are, how they are contributing to British society, etc. These voices then need to appear in the media as spokespeople and contributors on issues not only relating to Muslims and Islam but also on broader issues that concern them as British citizens.

8.3. **Attend Events:** Journalists can attend seminars, conferences, or roundtable discussions like those held by CfMM which equip them with the right resources, evidence and religious literacy to do their jobs better. We also hold “Meet the Media” events where media executives meet with Muslim community representatives from mosques, charities, educational institutions, professional and civic organisations. These events help the trust to be rebuilt, networks to be created and misconceptions to be allayed on both sides.

9. **What steps should be taken to better equip journalists when engaging with issues relating to faith?**

9.1. **Resources:** Journalists should make use of the resources of organisations like CfMM and MCB (which is the largest and most diverse Muslim umbrella organisation comprising of mosques, educational and cultural institutions, relief agencies, and charitable bodies, as well as women and youth groups). MCB has a wealth of information and resources on various issues relating to Muslims and Islam as well as access to its affiliate base of over 500 organisations.

9.2. CfMM’s resources are specifically for media stakeholders and include reports, roundtables, one to one meetings, submissions, consultations, guidelines and recommendations etc. They contain valuable data, evidence of good and bad practices in the media, and how to improve reporting on Islam and Muslims. Our terminology guidebook, which will be published later this year, will give a breakdown of the most frequently misused words and terms relating to
Islam and Muslims, an analysis of their scholarly and media usage as well as guidance and recommendations for journalists on how to avoid pitfalls and factual errors when reporting. All of the above are valuable resources which would equip journalists to engage better with issues relating to faith.

9.3. **Recruitment:** Diversity in the media and inhouse expertise on all levels including decision making positions is essential to ensure accurate and representative reporting. Organisations should be transparent about the make-up of their workforce and publish data. However, despite initiatives to recruit BAME people, quotas, diversity funds, and apprenticeship schemes - targets have yet to be met. At a recent CfMM event, we were told by senior news executives that the problem is that there are a shrinking minority of BAME and Muslim applicants in the pool. We hypothesize that this is because these minority voices do not believe their perspectives are important and that they believe they will be expected to conform to a kind of mass-media orthodoxy. Many have spoken of their experience of feeling intimidated, frustrated, or marginalised within newsrooms.

9.4. **Cultural Change:** While quotas are important, numbers are irrelevant if the culture of media organisations, the content they produce and the perspectives of stories remain the same. Minority communities are still portrayed as the other and are often vilified and scapegoated. However, a handful of BAME journalists will not be able to change that culture. They are often pigeon-holed and not given the freedom and flexibility to cover stories (whether BAME related or not) from a different sensibility. The diversity of programming and print content with stories that minorities would want to read and watch need to be increased.

9.5. **Training:** Diversity and inclusion training for staff is one way of tackling religious illiteracy. These can be delivered in-house or by organisations who have expertise from different faith groups. CfMM has already delivered training to some editorial teams on unconscious bias and the misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims in the media. If these training schemes could be adopted by all media outlets it could help heighten peoples’ awareness and sensibilities, encourage more inclusion and tolerance as well as have an impact on the overall coverage of different faiths.

9.6. **Normalisation:** Journalists need to expand their contact base through constructive engagement with faith groups and by consulting a range of sources. Trusted voices, sources, and experts from minority and faith communities should be called upon to comment on mainstream topics such as health, politics, the economy, the environment, etc, and not only on issues relating to faith. The views and voices of faith groups, including Muslims, should be an integral part of programming and coverage. A more diverse and representative workforce, a cultural change within media outlets, and a willingness to give space to views from a
different perspective would go a long way in helping the media learn more about religious literacy, reflect that in their output and correct the misunderstandings of minority groups in the media.

10. **Over the last decade, has religious literacy in the media improved, remained the same or deteriorated?**

10.1. While there is an attempt to diversify output and reflect faiths other than Christianity in Britain, society has become more polarised and some journalists pander to the extremes, which gives the impression that the media has become more hostile to minority groups and especially towards Muslims. While some organisations like the BBC have dedicated religious affairs correspondents and editors, others like the Times have reduced the role from full time to part-time. Tabloid newspapers do not have specific religious affairs correspondents and religion falls under the social or home affairs brief. There is a need to increase and improve the coverage of religion in the media. While the BBC has programmes like “Thought for the Day” or “Pilgrimage” which include people of different faiths, programmes like “Songs of Praise” still only represent one faith group. There should be more regular programmes on our national broadcaster which reflect the make-up of other faiths in this country.

11. **What steps can a) universities, b) journalists, c) publishers, d) broadcasters, and e) regulators take to improve religious literacy in media?**

11.1. **Universities:** Journalism courses need to have modules to look at how news organisations which have editorial policies in place which cover accuracy, discrimination, balance, etc are still making serious errors; how faith groups and minorities are covered in the media; and how the reporting of Islam and Muslims in particular, as evidenced by CfMM, is a particular problem with issues around accuracy, misrepresentation, and generalisations.

11.2. **Publishers and broadcasters:** Publishers and broadcasters should implement religious literacy and unconscious bias training. They should hold regular meetings and briefings with faith groups, scholars, and notable experts in the field of academia. Their understanding of religion and faith groups needs to improve, and their output needs to be greater.

11.3. **Regulators:** Without regulators that can hold publishers and broadcasters to account, there is little scope for curbing inaccurate reporting, reinforcing stereotypes and scapegoating minorities and Muslims in particular. Regulators can produce guidelines on the reporting of Islam and Muslims, and IPSO needs to extend Clause 12 on discrimination to include groups,
organisations, or institutions. There should also be financial penalties for the worst or repeat offenders. As a deterrent, regulators should enforce not only due prominence but equal prominence when corrections are made (see Appendix 1 for examples of poor and inaccurate reporting).

12. What public policy changes could improve religious literacy in the media?

12.1. Religious illiteracy and Islamophobia are societal and institutional problems which require legislative change as well as policies within the media and its regulators.

- The Royal Charter on press regulation needs to be implemented and the second part of the Leveson Inquiry, including an investigation into the prevalence of Islamophobia within the media, needs to commence.
- The Government should consider primary legislation to deal with social media offences and work with social media companies to develop an efficient strategy to tackle online hate speech as well as clickbait headlines.
- The media should commit to diversifying their organisations to reflect the makeup of the population, including faith groups, and have policies that ensure all staff members receive religious literacy training.
Appendix 1 – Examples of Poor and inaccurate reporting about Islam and Muslims

It is recognised that not all of these examples can or perhaps even should be regulated against, but together they demonstrate a serious concern given the evidence demonstrated in our submission.

1. Inaccurate and misleading articles that newspapers have corrected or been forced to correct, given the significance of the inaccuracies involved, include:

- “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis” (The Sun) 47
- “Ramadan train driver in crash: Rail accident experts claimed his fast caused the rush-hour derailment that led to three days of disruption” (The Sun)* 48
- “Isolated British Muslims are so cut off from the rest of society that they see the UK as 75 per cent Islamic, shock report reveals” (Mail on Sunday)* 49
- “Islamist school can segregate boys and girls” (The Sunday Times)* 50
- “Welcome to east London: Muslim gang slashes tyres of immigration-raid van before officers showered with eggs from high rise” (Mail on Sunday)* 51
- “UK mosques fundraising for terror” (Daily Star Sunday)* 52

(Starred items corrected following complaints by Executive Director of Centre for Media monitoring).

2. Problematic articles mentioning the person’s faith or religious practices:

- “‘I lost my boyfriend to Islam’: Woman reveals the heart-breaking toll of her boxing-champion partner’s radicalisation behind bars – as he vows to leave her for a Muslim” (Mail Online, Daily Mail Australia)* 53
- “PILGRIMAGE HORROR Ashura festival stampede kills at least 30 and injures 100 during Muslim bloodletting ceremony in Iraq” (The Sun)* 54
- “Devout Muslims slice open heads with swords during Ashura festival ritual” (Mirror)* 55
- “Stampede at Muslim festival kills 31 – at least 100 hurt in crush” (Daily Star)* 56
- “Finsbury Park mosque terrorist ‘batters Muslim paedophile in jail attack while shouting ‘f…… Allahu Akbar’” (Mail Online)* 57

50 https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/islamist-school-can-segregate-boys-and-girls-zklrnfq8
51 https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/sep/20/mail-on-sunday-apologises-for-muslim-gangs-attack-immigration-van-story
52 https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/apr/30/daily-star-sunday-uk-mosques-ipso
55 https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/devout-mosques-slice-open-heads-20002692
“Two women caught ‘using Muslim garments to steal food in Asda’ – before exposing their underwear” (Mail Online)\(^{58}\)

“Don’t come to work: Job on the line for Muslim convert prison psychologist after she failed to tell her new boss that she was struck off after love affairs with two convicted rapists” (Mail Online)\(^{59}\)

“Strict Muslim father-of-nine who imposed ‘traditional’ Islamic regime on family after two of his daughters refused arranged marriages faces jail for psychological abuse” (Mail Online)\(^{60}\)

3. Conflation of Muslims with violence, danger, and criminality.

“Cut out and keep guide: Here’s what terrorists look like” (The Sun)\(^{61}\)

“Muslim sex grooming” (The Times)\(^ {62}\)

“Mum-of-four butchered while caring for her young kids as cops probe Islamic honour killing lead” (Mail Online)\(^ {63}\)

“Imran Khan warns of mass violence if world ignores ‘ethnic cleansing’ in Kashmir” (Express)\(^ {64}\)

“Muslim husband who left his wife, 25, to slowly die over five days after being stabbed and gagged will serve his full sentence after losing his appeal - as mum says her daughter was a victim of an 'Islamic honour killing’.” (Mail Online)\(^ {65}\)

“Imam beaten to death in sex grooming town” (The Times)\(^ {66}\)

“‘WHO ARE THE BOMBERS?’ Ryanair boss sparks outrage by demanding extra anti-terror checks on Muslim men as ‘that’s where the threat is’” (The Sun)\(^ {67}\)

“COP CALL OUT Scots Muslim who sparked terror scare in Highlands has house searched by cops again after anonymous tip-off” (The Sun)\(^ {68}\)

“‘ Allahu will protect me:’ Chilling moment knifeman mutters to himself while lying in the back of a police wagon after Sydney rampage” (Mail Online – Daily Mail Australia)\(^ {69}\)

FLU FEARS Muslim parents refuse ‘non-halal’ children’s flu vaccine sparking outbreak fears” (The Sun)\(^ {70}\)

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\(^ {58}\) https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-731497/Women-caught-using-Muslim-robes-hide-items-stolen-Asda.html

\(^ {59}\) https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7227289/roanne-Senior-Skaf-gang-psychologists-Malek-Fahd-Islamic-School-job-investigation.html

\(^ {60}\) https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-716375/Muslim-father-imposed-traditional-Islamic-regime-family-faces-jail-psychological-abuse.html

\(^ {61}\) See Appendix for an image or here: after discussion, the Sun decided to take no action and refused to even acknowledge the concern.

\(^ {62}\) https://wvbc.org.uk/mcb-updates/muslim-council-britain-writes-times-following-incendiary-headline/

\(^ {63}\) https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/mail-online-breached-editors-code-with-inaccurate-islamic-honour-killing-headline/

\(^ {64}\) https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1166486/Imran-khan-ethnic-cleansing-India-Modi-Independence-day

\(^ {65}\) https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-808791/Muslim-husband-Mohamed-Naddaf-left-wife-25-slowly-die-loses-appeal.html


\(^ {67}\) https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3101674/ryanair-boss-extra-airport-terror-checks/


\(^ {69}\) https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/9604716/muslim-halal-children-flu-vaccine-outbreak/
4. Sensationalism and scaremongering about the apparent threat posed by Muslims are also widespread.

- “New £5 notes could be BANNED by religious groups as Bank CAN’T promise they’re Halal” (Daily Express)\(^71\)
- “BBC puts Muslims before you” (Daily Star)\(^72\)
- “Halal secret of Pizza Express” (The Sun)\(^73\)
- “Muslim vote could decide 25 per cent of seats” (Daily Mail).\(^74\)
- “The Government is proposing laws which risk making criticism of Islam a hate crime”\(^75\) IPSO upheld a complaint by CfMM.
- “European courts risk corroding free speech to create special status for Islam” (Telegraph)\(^76\)
- “We know why the Muslims are ant-Semitic” (Spectator)\(^77\)
- “Younger sister of Jewish schoolboy, 12, who forced to kiss the feet of a Muslim classmate in a Melbourne Park is sent a sickening taunt online” (Mail Online, Daily Mail Australia)\(^78\)
- “Jihad is as contagious as COVID-19 in the Maldives” (Economist)\(^79\)
- “The burka is the fifth column...we will wake in the Islamic Republic of Britain” (Times)\(^80\)

5. Underplaying the victimisation of Muslim communities

- “China shuts down three Muslim mosques due to “illegal religious education” during police raid” (Mail Online)\(^81\)
- “Muslim fury grows after protest deaths in Indian neighbourhood” (Mail Online)\(^82\)

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\(^71\) https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/express-correction-story-suggesting-muslims-wanted-to-ban-new-fivers-but-ipso-rules-no-breach-of-code/
\(^72\) http://www.islamophobiawatch.co.uk/bbc-puts-muslims-before-you/
\(^73\) https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/799401/halal-secret-of-pizza-express/
\(^74\) http://www.perspecsnews.com/read/politics/rising-islamophobia-in-uk/TyloRMZbXbHJ32XKU72
\(^75\) https://cfmm.org.uk/corrections/the-sun-kavanagh-complaint-upheld/
\(^77\) https://twitter.com/miqdaad/status/990995495815450625
\(^79\) https://twitter.com/miqdaad/status/1242363218728881925
\(^80\) https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/taj-hargey-interview-the-burka-is-a-fifth-column-we-will-wake-in-the-islamic-republic-of-britain-5wqhk0q8m
\(^81\) https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6546953/China-shuts-three-Muslim-mosques-illegal-religious-education-police-raid.html
\(^82\) https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/reuters/article-7828455/Muslim-fury-grows-protest-deaths-Indian-neighbourhood.html