

British Muslims in the Post-9/11 Era: The Challenge of Visibility and Media Misrepresentation

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Abstract

Drawing on the analysis of selected articles from British print media covering news on the growing visibility of Muslims in the country, this paper argues that the press has significantly contributed to the post-9/11 wave of anti-Muslim hatred in Britain. Through propagating the myth of an "imminent Muslim takeover of Britain and Europe", sections of the press nurtured the excessive fears among the public of extraordinarily rapid growth of 'an alien group with cultural values incompatible with the western way'.

Keywords: British Muslims, the press, visibility, islamisation, islamophobia.

مسلمو بريطانيا في فترة ما بعد الحادي عشر من سبتمبر: تحدي المرئية المتزايدة و التشويه الإعلامي

ملخص

اعتمادا على تحليل مقالات مختارة من الصحافة البريطانية المكتوبة التي تتناول المرئية المتصاعدة للمسلمين في البلاد يظهر هذا البحث المساهمة الفعالة للإعلام في تغذية موجة الكراهية ضد المسلمين التي شهدتها بريطانيا عقب أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر 2001. من خلال الترويج لأسطورة السيطرة الوشيكة للمسلمين على بريطانيا وأوروبا، أسهمت الصحافة المكتوبة في تغذية مخاوف البريطانيين المتزايدة من وتيرة النمو الديموغرافي السريع لأقلية مسلمة تحمل قيما ثقافية 'غير قابلة للتأقلم مع الثقافة الغربية'.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مسلمو بريطانيا، صحافة مكتوبة، مرئية، أسلمة، إسلاموفوبيا.

Musulmans britanniques dans l'ère post-11/09/2001 : le problème de visibilité et de représentation biaisée des medias

Résumé

Sur la base de l'analyse d'une sélection d'articles de journaux britanniques imprimés traitant de l'actualité concernant la visibilité croissante des musulmans dans le pays, cet article affirme que la presse a contribué de manière significative à la vague de haine contre les musulmans post-11/09/2001 en Grande- Bretagne. A travers la propagation du mythe du "grand remplacement des musulmans en Grande- Bretagne et en Europe", certaines parties de la presse ont nourri des peurs excessives parmi la population d'une croissance extraordinairement rapide "d'un groupe étranger dont les valeurs culturelles sont incompatibles avec celles de l'occident".

Mots-clés: Musulmans britanniques, journaux imprimés, visibilité, islamisation, islamophobie.

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Introduction:

One salient feature of the Muslim communities living in Britain and the west in the post-9/11 era is that of visibility. Western Muslims become more visible than ever before and issues pertaining to them become subject to constant scrutiny by the media. In the British context, the securitization of the Muslim community in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York in 2001 and London in 2005 is arguably the main reason behind the burst of public and media attention to Islam and Muslims in the country. As a matter of fact, it is well-established in academia that British news media have always represented Islam and Muslims in a largely negative light⁽¹⁾. The terrorist events in the wake of the new century led to further distortion of the image of Muslims in the media. Not only through depicting them as a security threat, but also by propagating the myth of 'the Muslim tide'--a hypothesis which holds that the Muslim population is growing so quickly that Muslims will become a majority in the west in the space of few decades and will subsequently overwhelm the fast-shrinking host population with their alien values and *sharia* law⁽²⁾. This paper focuses on the way sections of the British press reacted to the rapid demographic growth of Muslims and their increasingly visible presence in the public space; and how they covered news revealing manifestations of this growing visibility. It argues that their alarmist and sensational coverage of the new Muslim presence and their propagation of the myth that Britain is about to be swept away by a "Muslim tide" helped triggering xenophobic fears among the general public⁽³⁾.

1-Muslims in the Spotlight:

'By now, the whole question of the Muslim presence in Europe has assumed a new aspect. Thanks to migration and demography on the one hand and a dwindling European birthrate on the other, the Muslim proportion of the population is increasing steadily. The Syrian scholar Sadiq AL-Azm remarked in an essay that the only question that remains regarding the future of Europe is, "Will it be an Islamized Europe or Europeanized Islam?" This question is very close to be answered'⁽⁴⁾.

This quote is recurrent in many of Bernard Lewis' works. Lewis, who devoted much of his scholarly work warning that Islam is inherently incompatible with western secular values and that a clash of values, and even civilizations, is unavoidable, is among the chief intellectuals who laid the foundations for anti-Muslim fear in contemporary Europe. In many of his works, he warned of an imminent Muslim takeover of the continent. The quote is originally from the late Syrian leftist scholar Sadiq al 'Azm and represents a vision of the future of Europe that becomes propaganda of some right-wing groups and media outlets in the post-9/11 era.

The warnings of politicians, intellectuals, and journalists, who take part in this propaganda campaign, focus mainly on three elements: the security threat posed by radical European Muslims; the threat to European culture and identity due to a failure of integration; and the demographic growth of the Muslim population with high fertility rates. Right-wing politicians and large sections of the media found in the security climate post-9/11 a historic opportunity to promote these myths. The fact that hostility towards Islam and Muslims in Britain, and the west in general, is not the product of 9/11 as it has deep roots in British history, has facilitated their task⁽⁵⁾.

Islam was introduced to the British Isles for centuries but the presence of Muslims before the Second World War had been the most negligible. It was only during the second half of the twentieth century that the Muslim population started gaining gradual importance in size and influence. Hence, Muslims have been growing in number, diversity, and visibility well before 9/11. At the time of the attacks, Islam had already been the fastest growing religion in Britain and the continent as well⁽⁶⁾. It was in the aftermath of 9/11, however, that Muslims came to the spotlight gaining an unprecedented visibility.

With this increased visibility, the situation of Muslims in Britain, as in the continent, has also deteriorated in an unprecedented way with the introduction of some draconian anti-terror legislation and the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment. Nonetheless, there is evidence that 9/11 and

the rise of the so-called international terrorism did not create this situation and that Muslims have been the subject of discrimination, prejudice and marginalization since their early years of settlement in the continent⁽⁷⁾.

For the most part of their presence in Europe, Muslims had mostly been perceived as the 'Other' based on the Orientalist paradigm⁽⁸⁾. A long history of cultural stereotyping established an image of an Islamic culture that is sinister, malevolent and brutal⁽⁹⁾. According to Edward Said:

The idea that Islam is medieval and dangerous, as well as hostile and threatening to 'us', for example, has acquired a place both in the culture and in the polity that is very well defined. Such an idea furnishes a kind of a *priori* touchstone to be taken account of by anyone wishing to discuss or say something about Islam⁽¹⁰⁾.

What happened in the post 9/11 era, especially with the terrorist attacks in major European capitals associated with Muslim groups, is that hatred of Muslims has dangerously become mainstream in many instances within the terror-panic climate. This has been reflected in the increased hate crimes against Muslim individuals, their mosques and community centres and the highly negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims since 9/11. A 2016 survey found that the majority of Britons (72 %) believe Islam is not compatible with British values⁽¹¹⁾, while another report published by the Pew Research Center in the same year showed that unfavourable views about Muslims had risen by 9 percentage points in just one year, between summer 2015 and summer 2016⁽¹²⁾.

Negative perceptions of Muslims are likely affected by the highly negative and prejudiced portrayals of Muslims by parts of the mainstream press⁽¹³⁾. Their alarmist coverage of the new Muslim visibility contributed to the mainstreaming of Islamophobia in the country and led consequently to a surge in hate crimes against Muslims. Media coverage of Muslims and Muslim-related issues, in general, has increased considerably over the last two decades. In 2008, Moore et, al. found that news stories about Muslims increased dramatically over the period between 2000 and 2008, an increase partly fuelled by the terrorist attacks in New York in 2001 and London in 2005, but also as a product of a wider preoccupation with Islam and British society⁽¹⁴⁾.

As British Muslims were brought to the spotlight within the context of the 'war on terror,' revealed data on the growth of the Muslim community and the increased number of mosques caught the attention of the media. Consequently, this disadvantaged minority which had long complained about alienation and invisibility becomes suddenly very visible to the mainstream population, the media and to decision-makers.

Nevertheless, this new visibility of Muslims fueled populist and radical right Islamophobic discourses and has been increasingly received with immense hostility by the mainstream population. Politicians and journalists especially from the right overtly attacked the new prominence of Muslims in the public space. The British National Party (BNP) and other conservative and far-right bodies launched an anti-Muslim campaign making use of some widespread stereotypes and seeking to warn the public of the perils of the impending 'Islamification' of Britain, and the need to stop it in its tracks⁽¹⁵⁾.

The media was a principal tool in this campaign. The response of some media outlets to the new Muslim presence turned into large propaganda and contributed subsequently to the erosion of the civil rights and freedoms of Muslims in Britain and across the continent. It also helped create a general climate of fear among the mainstream population that was exploited by the extreme right political parties and Islamophobic bodies to make some gains and advance their hate agendas.

2- Muslims and the Press:

A considerable body of literature confirmed the contribution of the press to the negative construction of the "other" and by extension to phenomena of racism, xenophobia, and anti-Muslim sentiment in particular. The works of distinguished scholars of the field like Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Yeun Van Dijk and Elizabeth Poole highlighted the way Muslims have

been racialized and constructed as 'the enemy' by western media outlets. In most of this literature, the press is often critiqued for constructing the figure of the Muslim through an Orientalist lens whereby Muslims and Islam are continually marked out and contrasted with the values of the west⁽¹⁶⁾.

In Britain, Muslims have remained underrepresented in the media during the last century except during significant events related to Islam and Muslims at home such as the 1989 Rushdie Affair and abroad like the conflicts in the Middle East and other Muslim-majority countries⁽¹⁷⁾. Since the launch of the global war on terror following 9/11, Muslims have come to the media spotlight as never before. Reflecting the negative perception of Muslims among the general public, their portrayal in the British media has been largely negative and stereotypical.

There has been "a growing genre of news stories in the British press that focus on the incompatibility between Islamic and British values" in the era that followed 9/11⁽¹⁸⁾. This definition of Islam in opposition to the west contributed to the construction of such dualities like 'Islam and the west', 'Muslim and westerner', and 'us and them' through an Orientalist logic which is based on picturing Muslims as largely 'problematic', 'dangerous', and 'oppressive'. One dangerous outcome of this construction, according to Richardson, is that it subsequently leads to the subordination, marginalisation and exclusion of Muslims⁽¹⁹⁾.

The largely negative framing of Muslims in the British press before and after the watershed events of 9/11 is demonstrated by several research studies. Elizebeth Poole's extensive research approaches the construction of Muslims within the larger context of the general construction of ethnic minority groups in the media, which are largely represented within a 'negative conflictual framework' overshadowed by racialised tropes relating to crime, violence and immigration⁽²⁰⁾.

Sian et al. Demonstrate how the British press, especially tabloids, both contribute to, and reinforce an Islamophobic discourse through their mostly hostile, discriminatory and derogatory stories. Their study examined two tabloid national papers- *The Sun* and *Daily Mail*, and two broadsheet national papers- *The Independent* and *The Guardian*. They found that the press coverage representing Muslims is largely hostile and that Muslim voices remain marginal. 70 per cent of all the news items about Muslims gathered in their study were hostile⁽²¹⁾.

Ironically, media coverage of the various obstacles and issues facing Muslims as an underprivileged minority has remained minimal. Despite the Muslim community's socio-economic disadvantage, Moore et, al. found that only 5% of the news stories they analysed between 2000 and 2008 were based on attacks on or problems of British Muslims and that the notion of Islamophobia scarcely featured as a news topic⁽²²⁾.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and other Muslim advocacy groups, drew attention to this biased and largely negative representation of Muslims in the media which according to them contributed significantly to the racialization of this community and the demonization of its faith. A 2018 comprehensive study conducted by the MCB's Centre for Media Monitoring found that media reports on Muslims are contributing to a rise in Islamophobia with most British news outlets giving a "negative and misleading" coverage of the community. In print media, the study found that 59 per cent of the articles analysed associated Muslims with negative behaviour, while more than a third "misrepresented or made generalisations" about the community⁽²³⁾.

Echoing other research findings, the MCB's study revealed that while 78 per cent of the stories in the *Mail* on Sunday newspaper featuring Islam or Muslims living in the UK had a negative coverage of the community, *the Guardian*, the *New Statesman* and the *Independent* had the least negative portrayal of Muslims⁽²⁴⁾.

The largely negative perceptions of Muslims among Britons become one of the biggest challenges facing the country's Muslim population since the turn of the new century as it led

to more suppression of a community, which was already one of the most underrepresented and socially underprivileged communities in Britain⁽²⁵⁾.

Despite the fact that official data and empirical research showed that many of the conceptions widely held by the mainstream population about their fellow Muslim citizens are nothing but myths, they keep gaining increasing acceptance. One of the many reasons behind this is that the construction of Muslims as a terrorist threat serves the Labour government's agenda in the context of its 'war on terror' which approached the Muslim community through security lenses⁽²⁶⁾.

The increased number of hate crimes targeting Muslims and their places of gathering is said to have been motivated in part by the inflammatory discourses of some media outlets. In 2015, the metropolitan police recorded a sharp rise in hate crimes against Muslims in the capital London. London's Muslims have faced a 70% increase in Islamophobic attacks in the 12 months to July 2015⁽²⁷⁾. It was revealed that Muslim women who wore a headscarf or *hijab* accounted for some 60 per cent of victims⁽²⁸⁾. They become subject to different types of violent abuses at a daily rate.

3. Constructing the Muslim: From 'a Terrorist' to 'a Problem ':

The negative representation of Muslims in the British press is not only based on the security threat they pose but also on the perceived cultural threat which increases with the growth of Muslim presence and influence. According to Elizabeth Poole, the increased visibility of Muslims has established "a crisis of national identity" resulting in the development of a national narrative which excludes Muslims from identification with Britishness⁽²⁹⁾. Poole highlighted the consequences of this narrative:

"The increasing visibility of Muslims to non-Muslims in the UK in a global mediated world, in which Muslims are homogenised, has resulted in their construction as a threat to non-Muslims. This ideological threat (in the UK) allows Muslims to be suppressed"⁽³⁰⁾.

News about the new visibility of Muslims in the British public space in the aftermath of 9/11 becomes of primary focus to tabloids as well as broadsheet newspapers. The way they covered such news is said to have triggered concerns among the mainstream about what media like to call "the changing face of Britain". Many myths about the Muslim community and its growth have been circulating in the news media. James Nazroo, a professor of sociology at Manchester University, suggested that it is important to shed light on a large number of myths around the ethnic minority and religious minority populations in the UK⁽³¹⁾. As a matter of fact, in recent years most of these myths relate to Muslims, their demographic visibility and the place they occupy in the public space.

The myth of Britain being Islamized or the 'Muslim tide' is among the most widespread in the country. By focusing on the demonstrations of growing Muslim presence in the public space with an alarmist tone, newspapers helped nurturing this myth. The focus on the "extraordinary growth" of the Muslim population, for example, led Britons to overestimate the proportion of Muslims in the whole population. A survey conducted by Ipsos Mori revealed that people from the UK thought the proportion of Muslim inhabitants of Britain amounted to 21 per cent of the total population, that is to say, more than a fifth of the entire population, while it is 5 per cent only⁽³²⁾.

Worryingly, research revealed that a large section of the British population conceives the growth of the country's Muslim population as a threat to national identity. A study showed that a majority of the country would be concerned if a mosque was built in their area, while only fifteen per cent expressed similar qualms about the opening of a church⁽³³⁾.

The media is found to be responsible for the excessive fears of an Islamic threat that have spread throughout the UK and threatens mainstream British values. Since 2008, the focus of British newspapers' reports on Muslims shifted to differences in values between British Muslims and the mainstream—the focus had been on terrorism and terrorism-related issues before. The most common adjectives used to depict British Muslims in national print news

media between 2000 and 2008, for instance, were radical, fanatical, fundamentalist, extremist and militant⁽³⁴⁾.

This shift started in 2008 when the volume of stories in the press about religious and cultural differences between Islam and British culture or the west in general accounted for 32% of stories overtaking terrorism-related stories (27%) for the first time⁽³⁵⁾. In other words, while the dominant discourse on Islam and Muslims has always been shaped by a general tone of unease and Islamophobia, there has been a shift from depicting Muslims as a threat to depicting them as a problem since 2008, reflecting the mounting concerns about the increasing Muslim visibility in the country.

Various studies showed that the tabloid press portrayed Muslims with a more negative tone than broadsheet newspapers⁽³⁶⁾. Worryingly, however, not only tabloids but also some popular mainstream print media including some left-leaning newspapers raised concerns about the new Muslim visibility. The way they reported news demonstrating Muslim visibility in the country helped raise fears and fuel animosity towards Muslims.

Playing on the rising fears of the general public, sections of the press became part of a campaign to fan the flames of fear and hatred by way of promoting myths about Muslims' plans to establish *sharia* law and Islamize Britain. Due to the strength of this anti-Muslim propaganda and the media's huge impact on public beliefs and attitudes, various myths about the country's Muslim population gained increasing acceptance among the public moving from the fringes of society to the mainstream in recent years.

Headlines such as "Will Britain One Day be Muslim?" by the *Daily Mail*, "Muslims Will Become Majority in Europe" and "The Islamification of Britain: Record Numbers Embrace Muslim faith" by *The Independent*; and "Muslim Europe: the Demographic Time Bomb Transforming our continent" by the *Telegraph*, which have become very common in British newspapers, have contributed to constructing Muslims as a threat and subsequently fueled the violent anti-Muslim backlash that followed 9/11 and 7/7.

Taking a closer look at the way the press covered news revealing the new presence of Muslims helps understand the unease that surrounds the new visibility of Islam and Muslims in Britain. Examples of how the press attacked Muslim visibility and helped promote myths around Muslims changing the cultural landscape of the country and turning Britain into a Muslim country include the long controversies around birthrates among British Muslims, the popularity of the name Mohamed among newborn babies; and the harsh criticism by some newspapers of the decision of Channel4 to broadcast the Muslim call for prayer, the *adhan*, during Ramadan 2013.

4. The Press Attacking Muslim Visibility:

4.1 The Muslim Demographic 'Time Bomb':

On January 10, 2014, *The Times* recalled data from the 2011 census writing in its front page "Almost a Tenth of Babies and Toddlers in England and Wales are Muslim"⁽³⁷⁾. The figures according to *The Times* indicated a "startling shift" in the demographic trend in the country. Similar stories appeared in the *Telegraph* "Almost a Tenth of Babies and Toddlers in England and Wales are Muslim, Census Figures show" and the *Mail* "One in Ten Babies in England is a Muslim: Those Practicing the Religion 'Could Soon Outnumber Actively Worshipping Christians."

Given that the figures were nothing new, as they had been released by the ONS in 2011, bringing them to the news again in 2014 casts doubts about the real purpose behind such kind of stories. The reality about the rapid growth of the Muslim population and the young age profile of Muslims in the country had already been highlighted by the ONS in the 2011 and even the 2001 censuses and emphasizing them by a number of tabloids and broadsheet newspapers reveals a tendency among the political circles and some media outlets to implant fears among the general public by propagating the myth that British cultural values are at risk of being overrun by an extraordinary demographic growth of Muslims.

Douglas Murray, founder of the Centre for Social Cohesion, and a famous anti-Muslim speaker in Britain, considers that “the public concern about such kind of stories is legitimate” and that the media,

“Should not be blamed for reporting such news...the children that are born today and the religious communities they are born into are likely to have a very significant impact on the country tomorrow, and there are reasons for people in this country ...to be concerned”⁽³⁸⁾.

Rushnara Ali, a Muslim Labour MP replied to Murray: "if he replaced the word Muslim with Jewish or with black and minority ethnic...that would have a very different profound implication on what he is saying...it's completely understandable to newspapers to report on changes and new information but ..We take care in the way we talk about it"⁽³⁹⁾. The Muslim female MP was pointing to the fact that the intent behind bringing such kind of stories to the spotlight in that particular context and timing is suspicious. The official figures on the Muslim population in Britain confirm that these fears are unfounded as Muslims still form a small minority of around 5 % of the population⁽⁴⁰⁾.

4.2. The Name Muhammed Controversy:

Related to the demographic visibility of Muslims, the British press sparked another controversy on whether the name Muhammad is Britain's most popular boy's name that lasted for many years reflecting unease towards the new demographic visibility of Muslims. The yearly release by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on the most popular names for babies turns a headline-grabbing event and has been the subject of a big controversy since 2008 at least. The name of the prophet of Islam Mohamed has been the origin of the controversy. Stirring up fears of the Islamization of Britain, the news that Mohamed is the most popular baby boy's name in the country has been making the headlines for years.

The press has been reporting that the name Mohamed has been the first or second most popular name for newborn babies in England every year since 2009. The name, though, has never appeared on the top of the ONS' official lists as it is only through counting the different spellings of the name that it becomes the most popular. Some newspapers initiated the controversy by launching a fierce attack on the ONS and the government accusing them of disguising the truth and trying to hide the fact that the demographic and religious landscape of the country is changing or simply 'Muslims are taking over'.

In September 2009, the *Daily Mail* reported that the (ONS) published a list of the most popular boys' names in Britain. In this list the name of the prophet of Islam “Muhammad” with its different spellings was the third most popular boy's name in England and Wales in the year 2008⁽⁴¹⁾. One year after, the same newspaper wrote: “Mohammed is now the most popular name for baby boys ahead of Jack and Harry”⁽⁴²⁾. Serving the myth of the 'Muslim takeover' the article emphasized that in just one year the Islamic name jumped to the first position. It also recalled the cultural danger by highlighting how a foreign name has overtaken names that have deep roots in British traditions such as Jack and Oliver.

The least that can be said about the coverage of some newspapers to the news is that it was Islamophobic. According to the official list, which covered all births in 2009 in England and Wales "Mohammed" with this spelling was ranked 16, but when the variant spellings used are added it moved to the top of the list. Some newspapers accused the British government of trying to hide the fact about “the changing face of Britain”. The *Daily Mail* commented:

Unfortunately, in recent times we have been given plentiful cause for paranoia about attempts by official bodies to conceal from us information about the **changing face of Britain** which our rulers know that many people will not like...The ONS hit parade of children's names, as revealed for publication, seemed designed to mask a simple truth which dismays millions of people, and which politicians and bureaucracies go to great lengths to bury: the Muslim population of Britain is growing extraordinarily fast⁽⁴³⁾.

The *Telegraph*, in its turn, noticed:

The way in which the true figures emerged, days after the official Publication, will fuel claims that government statisticians tried to play down the increasing popularity of the

Muslim name. The official announcement by the ONS, which does not take variant spellings into account, states that Mohammed was only the third most popular name in London⁽⁴⁴⁾.

The simple fact that these stories failed to spot is that just because a particular name has a special preference among a particular group does not mean that this group is taking over. The name's popularity has become a headline-grabbing news story because there is a certain subcurrent in some parts of the media that the Muslims are taking over, which, is not true. Yet, the story keeps returning partly because it plays on fears of both immigration and cultural change⁽⁴⁵⁾.

The popularity of the name Mohammed continued to cause controversy in the 2010s. On 2 December 2014, when the web site *BabyCentre UK* revealed its findings on babies' names in 2014, a look at the different headlines shows how the controversy about the name reached its peak. While the *Guardian* and *The Huffington Post* inquired successively "Is Muhammad the Most Popular Boy's Name in Britain?", and "Is Muhammad Really the Most Popular Baby Name?", other newspapers settled the issue in their headlines; the *Independent's* "Muhammed Really is Most Popular Baby Name in the UK", the *Sun's* "Mohammed has Soared to Victory as Britain's Most Popular Boys' Name", the *Daily Mail's* "Muhammad Most Popular UK Boys' name" and the *Telegraph's* "Mohammad and Sophia Most Popular Baby Names of 2014." *The Daily Star* had a completely different view. It contradicted the other newspapers writing, "Hang on a Mo! Most popular boys' name is NOT Muhammad, it's Oliver".

Creating such unnecessary, sensational controversies played on the fears of people and helped promoting the myth of the Islamization of Britain. Media, therefore, played a significant role in raising concerns about and intolerance of Muslim visibility in Britain and by extension in the increase of hate crimes against Muslims. Just because Muslim families like to give their children the name of the prophet does in no way mean that Muslims are taking over.

Imran Awan, a sociologist at Birmingham City University who has been researching Islamophobia, believes that there is a tendency to sensationalise reporting around Muslim issues, with topics such as naming or *halal* meat acting as flashpoints. Awan blamed the rising far right: "Some Islamophobia is perpetuated by fear and a sense that Muslims are taking over and polarising society. Little issues such as the name of Muhammad are turned by the far right into vitriolic hate against Muslims"⁽⁴⁶⁾.

4.3. The 2013 Ramadan 'Ding Dong':

Against the background of rising Islamophobia, events surrounding Islam and Muslims in Britain and their new presence in the public space become big subjects of debate and headline-grabbing news stories. In the time when Muslims started demanding larger platforms to accommodate their growing demographics and visible presence in the public space, tabloids and right wing press escalated their attack on the growing Muslim visibility warning that British society and values are at risk of being overrun by a rapidly increasing Muslim population and Islamic influence.

When the mainstream British TV company, "Channel 4" decided to broadcast the Muslim call for prayer, the *adhan*, during Ramadan in 2013, the move triggered a big interest from the press with many newspapers attacking the move and causing a new controversy. Channel 4, the first mainstream British television channel to broadcast the call for prayer on a daily basis, made the decision to "provoke people to think about Islam in ways that aren't associated with terrorism," and to provide "a voice to the under-represented" because "Islam is one of the few religions that's flourishing, actually increasing in the UK"⁽⁴⁷⁾. Nevertheless, the headline-grabbing initiative, which involved also a season of programmes around the period of prayer, called 4Ramadan, received a stream of harsh criticism by the extreme political right and the press.

The *Sun* attacked the initiative with a sarcastic front-page headline "Ramadan-a-Ding-Dong"⁽⁴⁸⁾. To serve the myth of Muslims plotting to impose *sharia* in Britain, *The Sun's*

article, whose tone is generally hostile to Muslims, gave voice to extremists from both the Muslim community and the political right. A spokesman of the extreme right party UK Independence Party (UKIP) said: "This is a priceless piece of attention seeking. I cannot believe that the majority of mainstream Muslims want to see this. It will inflame community tension." The Muslim voice was represented by the famous radical preacher Anjem Choudary, accused of encouraging terrorism, who said he welcomed any move to promote Islam adding that : "Islam is the fastest growing ideology in this country — by some accounts Britain could be a Muslim country by 2050." The article also interviewed Abu Zakariyya, of the radical Islamic Emergency Defence group who commented: "We want to see Sharia law in the UK and only God knows if this could be a step towards it"⁽⁴⁹⁾.

By bringing in voices of few extremists whose attitudes can in no way be representative of the majority of Muslims, this news item by *The Sun* contributes to promoting the myth of Muslims planning to impose *sharia* law in Britain. The simple act of broadcasting the Muslim call for prayer during one month by a national media channel is presented as one step in the alleged plan to implement *sharia*. This contributes to the construction of Islam and Muslims as a danger. The Muslim voice in popular newspapers like *The Sun* is usually marginal ⁽⁵⁰⁾, but when it is present like in this article it is unrepresentative of Muslims.

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, told *The Independent*: "The percentage of Muslims in the UK is very small so few people will be interested in it. It may be a novelty and Channel 4 is good at causing a sensation. We don't want to see any broadcaster becoming a platform for religious proselytising"⁽⁵¹⁾.

In an article titled "Why Channel 4's Plan to Air the Daily Muslim Call to Prayer during Ramadan is a Divisive and Cynical Stunt", the *Daily Mail* launched a fierce attack on Channel 4 and described the plan to air the *adhan* as "a divisive and cynical stunt"⁽⁵²⁾. Reflecting the "Muslim" versus "Christian" binary, the author described the decision as "part of the anti-Christian bias of the intellectual establishment" and wondered:

"Are we sure that by broadcasting a call to prayer in this way that [Channel 4] wants to help Muslims? Or is it — much more likely in my opinion — yet another case of the liberal establishment, of which Channel 4 is, of course, the mouthpiece, sticking its fingers in the eye of Christianity?"⁽⁵³⁾

The *Daily Mail* article involved also a criticism of multiculturalism. The author addressed the readers: "Does this cheer you up? Does it make you think what a happy, tolerant, multicultural society Britain has become? Or does Channel 4's move nauseate you, as it does me?" Hinting to the claim that Muslims are receiving a special treatment at the expense of the Christian majority, the author went on, "the fact that this is still a country in which the huge majority of people, when questioned, still claim to be some sort of Christian counts for nothing in the eyes of the secular liberals who control most of our media"⁽⁵⁴⁾.

Through such sensational discourse, these tabloids worked as engines for agitation against Muslim visibility. A consequence of their agitation was that Channel 4's broadcast of the Muslim call to prayer during the holy month of Ramadan was the programme that brought the broadcaster the most complaints in 2013. The broadcast received 2,011 complaints about its 4Ramadan season, with 1,658 specifically about the broadcast of the daily call to prayer. The head of factual programmes for Channel 4, Ralph Lee, commented: "The level of Islamophobia we encountered with the 4Ramadan season was unexpected"⁽⁵⁵⁾.

Conclusion:

Muslims used to be a relatively invisible minority in the pre-9/11 era. They received very little attention from the media. When they underwent a drastic transformation becoming a hyper-visible group in the wake of the new century, they caught the attention of the media whose coverage of Muslim-related issues increased considerably. Ironically, the visibility they gained post-9/11 brought them to the spotlight, but only to be portrayed in a very negative light. While it is true that the hostility to Muslims is not a product of 9/11 or 7/7, these events did exacerbate the stereotypical perception of Islam and Muslims as the media

contributed to the construction of Muslims as potential terrorists. The focus of media reporting on Muslims would shift later to matching the 'cultural threat' to the increasing visibility of Muslims, propagating myths about the size of the Muslim population and its increasing cultural influence. Hence, the press had a significant impact on the public response to the new visibility of Muslims which was dominated by fear and resentment. Despite the fact that official statistics and serious studies debunk most of the widespread popular misconceptions about British Muslims, these myths gained increasing acceptance among the public and went mainstream indirectly inciting hatred against Muslims and symbols of their faith. The above examples illustrate the alarmist tone and the sensational language utilized by sections of the British press to report news related to the size of the Muslim population or their new cultural visibility. The construction of Muslims as an alien threat to the western cultural values echoes a long history of Orientalist portrayal which is arguably one of the biggest challenges facing Muslim groups in Britain, and the west in general, since the wake of the new century.

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