"Whether That's Truly Objective Journalism, Probably Not". Professional Retreatism and Professional Dilemmas When Reporting on Muslims

Nadia Haq

Published online: 03 Mar 2024.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

"Whether That's Truly Objective Journalism, Probably Not". Professional Retreatism and Professional Dilemmas When Reporting on Muslims

Nadia Haq 🅙
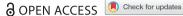
Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales, UK

ABSTRACT

Professional retreatism can be seen as a central concept in guiding journalistic role performance. It relates to how journalists distance themselves from the stories they produce by drawing upon professional ideals such as objectivity to produce a non-interventionist detached account of the news. But what happens when this professional retreatism ends up reproducing, rather than challenging, an existing media bias that contributes to the further marginalisation of a minority group? Drawing on 23 qualitative interviews with British press journalists, the article examines the dilemmas they face in their professional roles when it comes to negotiating objectivity in the reporting of stories involving Muslims. The study finds that objectivity as a form of professional retreatism can work in a counter-productive way to limit journalists' abilities to value and act upon their own moral and ethical judgements when producing Muslim-related stories. The article further argues that recent scholarship on journalistic role performance and the tensions between journalistic ideals and practices can provide an important missing insight into why spaces for resistance and contradiction can also coexist alongside the more negative representations.

Introduction

Based on large-scale content analysis of press coverage, there is now a significant body of empirical research that points to a long-standing anti-Muslim bias within British newspapers. Over two decades of research reflects how Muslims and Islam are represented in British newspapers in disproportionately negative ways (Poole, 2019; Bleich et al., 2015; Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008; Poole, 2002). Studies reflect a shared consensus of the dominant tendency of the media to negatively frame Muslims while portraying Islam as a violent religion (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017). Muslims are disproportionately portrayed as the "Other" compared to other ethno-religious groups (Bleich et al., 2015), framed in opposition to the British majority and its

CONTACT Nadia Haq ✉ Haqn@cardiff.ac.uk; 🐦 @_mediaresearch

liberal values (Poole, 2019; Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008). While this now considerable body of research can tell us much about how Muslims are represented, there is a major empirical gap in understanding why journalists represent Muslims in these ways, or for why tensions, differences and contradictions can also be found in press coverage.

Drawing on 23 in-depth qualitative interviews with professional journalists working in British newspapers, the study sought to gain this perspective from an analysis of journalism practices through the lens of professional retreatism. This article focuses specifically on the journalistic practice of objectivity in the reporting of stories involving Muslims and Islam. I return to the early work of Stuart Hall on media hegemony, and his conceptualisation of professional retreatism to analyse how objectivity can contribute to the reproduction of the media's anti-Muslim bias. Professional retreatism relates to how journalists distance themselves from the stories they write using the professional codes and conventions of journalism to produce a non-interventionist detached account of the news. With its focus on the technical aspects of journalism, Hall (1974) argues that professional retreatism acts to distance the journalist from any content they produce – even when it is problematic.

With increasing polarisation and disinformation contributing to rising levels of prejudice and hatred against Muslim communities (Tell MAMA, 2023), at what point do journalists need to recalibrate their role performance to a more interventionist position that relies upon (often personal) agential judgements? The article unpacks this important question through the study of the tensions, contradictions and dilemmas faced by journalists when it comes to reporting on Muslim-related stories. In doing so, the study presents a significant contribution to the issue of negative media representations of Muslims by moving away from the content analysis of media coverage towards a more introspective analysis of journalism's role in both reproducing and challenging these representations.

The article further reflects how recent scholarship on journalistic role performance can provide an alternative explanation to Hall's professional retreatism by considering the tensions journalists face in aligning the ideal of objectivity with its use in their everyday practices. This can lead to spaces for reconfiguring how professional ideals are understood and applied in ways that challenge, rather than entrench, existing biases against Muslims. By studying journalists on a microlevel as agents conflicted between the competing ideals behind their professional role, the article reflects how a closer alignment between objectivity as a journalistic ideal and its application in everyday practices can contribute to either reproducing or challenging negative Muslim representations in the British press.

Literature Review

Representations of Muslims in the British Press

For over two decades, studies across disciplines have analysed media content to explore how Muslims have become the favoured folk devils of the Western media (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). Ahmed and Matthes (2017) meta-analysis of 345 studies on Muslim representation in the media reflects a shared consensus that the dominant tendency of the media is to negatively frame Muslims while portraying Islam as a violent religion. When it comes specifically to British newspapers, large-scale analyses of their content reflect how Muslims are frequently represented as a threat to the Western liberal way

of life (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017), and in connection to conflict (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008). Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery's (2013) extensive corpus linguistic analysis of over 200,000 British newspaper articles, for example, finds Muslims are represented as easily offended, alienated, and in conflict with non-Muslims. Similarly, two-thirds of British news articles analysed by Moore, Mason and Lewis (2008) portray British Muslims as a threat (relating to terrorism); a problem (in terms of incompatible differences); or generally in opposition to British values (3). Muslims are also significantly more likely to be represented negatively as a "problem" than other ethno-religious groups (Bleich et al., 2015).

In charting the way that the representation of Muslims and Islam changes following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7, Moore, Mason and Lewis (2008) highlight that the number of news stories concentrating on religious and cultural differences between British culture and Islam overtake the number of stories reporting on terrorist events. This corresponds with an increasing shift in representations of Muslims in terms of their perceived cultural incompatibilities as the most problematic of minority groups within multicultural Britain (Poole, 2019).

Poole (2012) highlights how patterns of representation in press coverage of British Muslims often follow dominant "a discourse of the nation" narrative around assertions of "Britain" and "Britishness" (164). The media's emphasis on incompatible cultural differences and conflict when it comes to coverage about Muslims largely serves to create symbolic boundaries to ensure social stability for the dominant majority and to maintain hegemonic power relations (Poole, 2012). In hegemonic media discourse about Islam, Muslims are constructed as immature and non-contemporaneous subjects when compared with the civilised West (Opratko 2019). As Poole (2002) asserts, this Orientalist media framing of Muslims functions in a hegemonic sense by enabling the management of the "Other", while "promot(ing) an agreed sense of national identity at the 'Other's' expense in order to protect and maintain social structures and systems" (251). By being homogenised as a monolithic community, Muslims end up being dominantly represented as a separate imagined community to the rest of British society (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013).

Media Hegemony and Professional Retreatism

According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall's conceptualisation of media hegemony, the reproduction of negative representations of Muslims can be aligned to the need to reinforce dominant, often exclusionary perspectives on the position of Muslims within British society. Hall (1974) argues that media hegemony does not necessarily imply direct pressure or control over journalists, but that journalists' orientation towards dominant definitions becomes realised through the more routine practices of news production. News production reflects a structural process in which specific journalistic practices reinforce dominant assumptions about society and how it should operate, while keeping journalists themselves in a position of relative structured subordination (Hall et al., 1978:59).

Furthermore, Hall (1974) maintains that these journalistic practices bestow a normative dignity on journalists as a validated and authoritative source of knowledge, legitimising them as independent, public servants, with no interests or agendas of their own. In

relation to the representation of Muslims, however, the media itself acts to privilege the preferred frames and ideas of the powerful by ignoring the unequal relative weights set by the power-relations of those involved (Hall, 1974). Media debate of Muslim-related topics, whether about Islamophobia, the wearing of the burka, or terrorism for example, is confined to the frames chosen and set by media producers. While Muslim spokespersons are invited to put forward their positions, their own interpretations will ultimately be restricted to what Hall (1982) describes as the already "established terms of the problematic in play" (81).

Hall (1974) is particularly scathing of journalistic objectivity, branding it "an operational fiction" as a critique that an unbiased and true account of reality can be obtained through the depersonalisation and rationalisation of journalistic practices. By obscuring how news stories are the product of a selective manipulation of the raw data presented to the journalist through the lens of hegemonic power relations (Hall, 1974: 23), objectivity permits the recursive reproduction of negative representations of marginalised groups by ignoring existing inequalities in how minorities are perceived. Journalists' acceptance of objectivity as a "neutral structure" leads to a form of professional retreatism, where they believe they must be distanced from the stories they report on to produce an untainted, non-interventionist, and detached account of the news.

When it comes to representations of Muslims and other minority communities, the starting point for Hall is the recognition that the journalistic ideal of objectivity serves to blur how the media defines, rather than reproduces, reality. Instead of reflecting objective truths, media discourse is the product of a process of translation and exchange where cultural communication takes place within an imbalanced circuit of difference and power (Hall, 1997:11). Similarly, media representations are seen to be the product of cultural practices at a given time and space, influenced by prior discursive positions. Rather than objective reflections of what a particular person or community "*is'*, representations are the end product of an active process of signification, of "selecting and presenting, of structuring […] [of] making things mean" (Hall, 2006:118).

By subconsciously deferring their own judgements in favour of detachment, journalists end up reproducing hegemonic interpretations of the news that inherently reproduce inequalities in terms of how marginalised communities are represented. Recognising that journalists can perform within relatively autonomous codes of their own (Hall, 2006) - while still operating within a structure of legitimations that narrow their interpretations of the news in practice - can offer some explanation towards the enduring reproduction of negative Muslim representations in the British press. Journalists need not actively seek to reproduce anti-Muslim representations as this reproduction is systematically entrenched within their own ideals and practices.

Tensions Between Objectivity as an Ideal and as a Practice

Hall's conceptualisation of objectivity as a form of professional retreatism that compounds existing media biases against marginalised groups provides a useful insight into the enduring nature of the media's anti-Muslim bias. On its own, however, it struggles to account for the tensions and contradictions that also appear within British press coverage alongside the more negative representations of Muslims. Although patterns of British press discourse show that newspapers do routinely and negatively racialise Muslims

(Meer, Dwyer and Modood 2010), "slippages, ambivalences, and contradictions" in content about Muslims are also found across newspapers, within the same newspaper and even within the same article (Poole, 2002:100).

As an example, the dominant Western media narrative on the Muslim veil continues to be that it oppresses women (Golnaraghi and Dye, 2016), but there has also been some growing openness and diversity in its wider representations across newspapers (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010). Media reporting on the Danish cartoons' controversy also reflected two almost contradictory media frames involving the values of "freedom of speech" on one hand and the need for "religious tolerance" towards Britain's Muslim communities on the other (Craft and Waisbord, 2008 cited in Jenkins and Tandoc, 2019). Studies examining European press coverage of public debates on religious rights for Muslims finds that coverage at times can be more positive towards Muslims than negative (Carol and Koopmans, 2013; Vanparys, Jacobs and Torrekens, 2013). How can we then make sense of how journalism practices such as objectivity can lead to the reproduction of disproportionately negative representations of Muslims and still account for the exceptions and challenges to these representations?

In their extensive corpus linguistics analysis of British press coverage of Muslims and Islam, Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2013) suggest that these contradictions are best understood as reflecting an underexplored "tension in journalism" (256). Little is known empirically about the nature of these tensions in terms of journalism practices, why they exist, and how they impact on media coverage about Muslims. The concept of journalistic role performance can help to supplement this gap. Mellado (2021) maintains that these tensions arise from the relationship between the normative conceptions of journalism and the practice of journalism itself. This requires a consideration of the gaps between what journalists think they should be doing (journalist role conception) and the news stories they produce within the media institutions they work for (journalism performance) (Hellmueller and Mellado, 2015). By unravelling journalism as a social practice and as an institution (Hallin, 2016), the ensuing tensions between its ideals and practices can help to shed light on both the reproduction of negative Muslim representations and the contradictions that journalists experience in the reporting of stories about Muslims. In this way, journalistic role performance can potentially supplement Hall's media hegemony approach by making space for the autonomy and power of individual journalists to decide how to report on stories (Mellado and Van Dalen, 2014).

This article considers how the tensions experienced by journalists in the application of the ideal of objectivity can provide this missing insight into how journalists' practices contribute to both the reproduction of the anti-Muslim media bias and its potential contestation. The research questions to be explored in the article are as follows:

RQ1: How do British journalists understand and apply the journalistic ideal of objectivity?

RQ2: What dilemmas and tensions do journalists face in the gap between the ideal of objectivity and its application in the reporting of stories involving Muslims?

RQ3: How do journalists reconcile the tensions caused between objectivity as an journalistic ideal and objectivity in practice?

Method

The study involved 23 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with British press journalists carried out between January to July 2018 to uncover the tensions journalists faced between competing professional values, practices and beliefs in the reporting of stories involving Muslims. This corresponds closely to the assumption that journalists conceptions of their professional role are likely to have an impact on how they report the news (Hellmueller and Mellado, 2015).

Journalists are known to be highly defensive against insinuations of bias in their work (Patterson and Donsbagh, 1996), and it was likely that those who had already faced some criticism over the way they reported on stories involving Muslims might be reluctant to participate in the study. In their study using interviews with both Muslim and non-Muslim media producers of British newspapers, Holohan and Poole (2011) found that the journalists who responded positively to their research invitations tended to be those with an existing interest in the issue of Muslim representation and were mostly from the more liberal media. The more conservative, right-leaning newspapers tended to decline the invitation, risking a potential bias in the sample.

To mitigate this potential bias, a sample matrix was drawn up to ensure that approaches were being made to a relatively mixed sample of journalists in terms of being male/female, tabloid/broadsheet, right-leaning/left-leaning, local/national and Muslim/non-Muslim. In recognition of the changing conditions that journalists now work under (Deuze and Witschge, 2018), the sample also included news agency journalists, and freelance journalists who wrote for newspapers but were not employed by them.

The sampling process involved several steps. First, a pool of journalists who had written on Muslim-related topics was identified by trawling through hundreds of articles online across newspapers. Once identified, journalists were approached in tranches to ensure a good distribution across the sample matrix. If more left-leaning newspaper journalists were recruited in one tranche, for example, the next tranche focused on recruiting right-leaning newspaper journalists, and so on. In total, an iterative sampling technique with four recruitment and interview rounds was used. The sample consisted of 14 male to 9 female journalists, reflective of the general gender bias in the make-up of British newsrooms with a male/female ratio of around 3:2 (Andi, Selva and Nielsen, 2020). The sample included six Muslim journalists working for mainstream British newspapers. A further breakdown of the sample by type of newspaper/journalism and political leaning (for national newspaper journalists) can be found below (Table 1).

Each interview lasted around 60 min, and was designed to draw out the tensions and dilemmas that journalists face in the reporting of stories involving Muslims. An interview schedule was drawn up to act as a flexible guide rather than a rigid questionnaire and was

Table 1. Sample breakdown.

National Journalists (Total 13)			
Tabloid	**Broadsheet**	**Right-Leaning**	**Left-Leaning**
5	8	7	6
Other Journalists (Total 10)			
Local	**Freelance**	**Online**	**Agency**
5	3	1	1

split into four sections: 1. Questions about participants personal journeys into journalism; 2. Questions about Journalism as a practice; 3. Specific discussions about articles written by journalist involving Muslims; 4. Questions about the general debate on the negative representation of Muslims.

These questions sought to elicit a greater understanding of the relationship between how journalists conceive their professional role and the actual practice of producing news stories (Hallin, 2016). Part of the interview process involved discussing published articles that the journalist had produced involving Muslims and Islam covering a wide range of topics from national events such as terrorist attacks and "grooming gang" stories, to stories about Islamophobia, debates about the Muslim veil, to more local or regional stories about mosques or charitable activities of local Muslims. Drawing out journalists' own framing strategies when it came to Muslim representation made it possible to connect the interviewees' earlier conceptualisations of journalism and its roles directly with the observed outcome (i.e.,: the news product itself) (Baden, 2019).

For consistency, pseudonyms were used to anonymise all interviewees, particularly as some journalists expressed levels of anxiety about being critical of the newspapers they worked for. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and data was analysed using thematic discourse analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This more interpretative level of analysis was key for inductively capturing the tensions and dilemmas faced by journalists in terms of how they reported on stories involving Muslims.

Findings

Objectivity as Professional Retreatism

The first research question relates to how British journalists understand the ideal of objectivity and how it is applied in practice. Across interviews, journalists' clearly identified objectivity as an integral part of their professional role and an intrinsic part of their professional identity. As freelance journalist Hasina stated:

> When you're being objective, you're playing a role. You're being professional and you are kind of just basically trying your best to fill the role without having any bias.

In line with Hall, the interviews further reflected how journalists associated objectivity as a tool for seeking out a truthful rendition of a news event. The findings show that journalists' had internalised the claim that by distancing themselves from contaminating the stories they report on, they would be able to get closer to the truth of a news story. Press agency journalist Amanda, for example, shared:

> On being objective, at least I can sleep at night. I don't feel guilty about what I'm doing, I'm not ruining somebody's life today. I'm just telling the truth and it's so empowering and reassuring.

The journalists' belief in objectivity show how professional ideals can act as procedural mechanisms to lead them to social truths and ensure the legitimacy of journalism as a public institution is sustained (Anderson, 2019). In support of Hall's (1974) conceptualisation of objectivity as a technique of professional retreatism, the interviews point to how objectivity worked as a strategic ritual (Tuchman, 1972) to professionally and psychologically distance the journalists from any potentially problematic content they produced.

For example, when James is asked whether he ever worried about the potential conse-
quences of some of the articles he wrote involving Muslims, he replied:

> If asked rationally I would say well, I just put stuff out there and I have no idea of whether it
> will have any impact. Even if it does have an impact, you can't control the consequences. You
> can't control how people will read [it] and what lessons they will draw from that.

This form of distancing follows Hall's account of professional retreatism where objectivity
functions to reduce the obligations of the journalists to being accountable only for the
technical mechanics of producing a story, rather than any meaningful engagement
about their actions or the potential biases they may be reproducing.

A deeper analysis of the interviews revealed the parallel presence of a more contradic-
tory and conflictual understanding of objectivity amongst journalists. This became
increasingly evident as journalists began discussing objectivity in less abstract terms
and more about how they personally applied it in practice. When asked about what he
believed the role of journalism was, tabloid journalist Ryan, stated:

> I think it's to *present* news rather than to kind of deliver it. It is to package it and hand it over
> rather than just to give it objectively.

In contrast to Hall's critical hegemonic interpretation of how journalists think they use
objectivity in their work, this concept of "packaging" the news appears to align more
with how Hall himself explains the constructive nature of news production. This was a
recurring theme across journalists' interviews when questioned specifically about how
their adherence to objectivity applied in the case of reporting stories involving
Muslims. Broadsheet journalist Francesca shared:

> I feel very nervous of any journalist who says they are producing the truth. I think that's a kind
> of naivety which is really problematic, well that's a professional delusion […] Any journalist
> must be aware that they are always arranging those facts in a way that is likely to strengthen
> the story.

A similar struggle to reconcile objectivity was provided by local journalist Catherine:

> I think it's essential, you should be as objective as possible. I had a lot of times where I would
> interview somebody, and my personal beliefs they completely contradicted that. I try to be as
> fair and neutral as possible […] but I don't know if true objectivity is ever possible, if that
> makes sense.

While Catherine tries to suppress her personal judgements in her quest to remain objec-
tive, she simultaneously questions whether "true objectivity" is even possible when
reporting on controversial topics. Journalists appeared to oscillate between the two
stances – of centralising objectivity as a professional ideal while struggling to reconcile
its practical application in terms of their everyday practices. These findings support
recent literature on journalistic role performance around the inevitable gap between
abstract ideals and everyday practices as journalists strive to live up to impossible norma-
tive standards (Mellado and Van Dalen, 2014).

Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) further suggest that journalists' resigned acceptance of
the constraints around their practices has become part of an internalised socialisation
process. Most journalists recognise at least on some level that they cannot completely
detach themselves as they inevitably make judgements on how a story is framed, what

aspects to foreground, what connections to make with other stories, what sources to use and therefore what meaning to offer to audiences (Baden, 2019). Yet when it comes to reproducing existing biases within media coverage, the depersonalisation and rationalisation of journalistic practices can serve to privilege certain interpretations over others in the belief that journalists can only produce accurate interpretations of reality by refraining from any ideological, emotional, or value-laden judgements (Anderson, 2008:250).

Objectivity and the Curbing of Journalistic Agency

In relation to the second research question, the findings so far point to the dilemmas and tensions that journalists face in reconciling the gap between the ideal of objectivity and its application in practice. While journalists would make these efforts in their perception of objectivity as an ideal that mitigates bias, in practice it could have the opposite effect by reinforcing existing media biases in the case of stories involving Muslims. The findings reflected that even where journalists believed an interview or article was leaning towards a biased representation of Muslims, they felt obliged to take a deliberate step back in the name of objectivity to avoid their personal judgements from tainting news output.

> That's something that all journalists find irks us because we think that we know this story best. At the same time, it means that if we get too involved in this story, we can tend to be biased. So, the news editor comes in, says that is not the angle, well that is not the headline I want. Once you get to a certain stage in your career, you learn to put emotion aside and write objectively. (Mark, local journalist)

Acting as a form of professional retreatism, the ideal of objectivity reduced the agency of journalists to intervene directly on how they reported on Muslim-related stories by self-policing their judgements even if they themselves felt compromised ethically.

Mark's account above further highlights the contradictions between objectivity as an ideal that protects from individual biases against the subjective demands of the news editor or newspaper they write for. This is particularly the case for objectivity within the British press, where different newspapers reflect different political and social positions (Karim, 2002) and accordingly adopt different news values, styles and audiences. Yet by conceding their agency to editors and those above them within their media institutions, journalists become caught between being told to write objectively while accepting that editors want stories to be written in certain (non-objective) ways. A case in point was found in this account from tabloid journalist Roger giving an example about how different newspapers represent stories about knife crime:

> If you look at the knife crime stuff today, there's a feeling of, you know, we need to crack down hard on this, we need to stop and search, we need to seize knives, that sort of attitude in a lot of papers. But you see in *The Guardian* they're saying spend money on them, they're highlighting that angle, spend money on youth clubs for kids and stop school exclusions and all that. Now (laughs) the truth is that one is just a different political viewpoint, and you go for whatever you go for.

By denying journalists the agency to question whether the framing of a story is perpetuating existing media biases or societal prejudices, objectivity as a form of professional retreatism was seen to silence alternative ways of reporting on already marginalised

communities. Tabloid journalist Martin, for example, shared how his editor asked him to re-write an article from a less sympathetic angle:

> He said you need to completely rewrite this, this is too sympathetic […]That's not how we're going to do it. So, there is very much a correcting influence that you need to basically write this how we want you to.

This discussion brings us back to Hall's critical conceptualisation of objectivity as an "operational fiction". Objectivity as an ideal is not necessarily problematic in itself unless its application in practice contributes to repressing journalists own judgements while justifying and reproducing existing biases within the media. Reconciling the gap between objectivity as an ideal and its application in practice requires taking into account how journalism practices can disguise that objective news stories about Muslims are instead socially (and often politically) contextual and selective.

These findings are supported by similar conclusions reached by studies looking at the gap between objectivity as an ideal and as a practice when it comes to journalistic role performance. Harlow and Brown (2022), for example, observe how the normative professional ideal of objectivity over-rides journalists' own personal judgements in the reporting of protests. Journalists believe they are acting objectively by treating the protests as any other breaking news events by disregarding the rationales behind the protests. Rather than protecting journalists from bias, Harlow and Brown find this often served the opposite effect of having a delegitimising effect for certain protests such as those about racial injustice.

Reconfiguring Objectivity

The final research question explores how journalists attempt to reconcile thetensions between objectivity as a journalistic ideal and objectivity in practice. In contrast to the interviews with national journalists, the findings show that local journalists can achieve a closer alignment between the ideal and their practices when reporting stories involving Muslims. Rather than adopting a position of professional retreatism, local journalists were seen to have some autonomy to make personal judgements about how stories involving Muslims were reported. This increased sense of autonomy meant they were able to positively intervene on how these stories were told when the ideal of objectivity was superseded by their journalistic commitment to local public interest. Local journalist Ben for example discussed stories he had written about Muslims campaigning against the discrimination they experienced in finding local rental properties. It was possible to see directly how his active engagement with the stories he reported on was seen as a strength, rather than a weakness, in his journalism:

> The reason I attempt to go the extra mile in my reporting and try to do more community focused stories is to attempt to get a more, I guess it's a devalued word, but a more truthful picture of where the community is and the real lives of the people within it. For me, it's about pushing back against the atomised bullshit that we do see coming back at us online. The reason it's important to tell stories truthfully and accurately is to push back against this dehumanising narrative that is out there.

Ben's account reflects a different conceptualisation of journalism's truth claims. Rather than uncovering truths through objectivity, truths are uncovered through the active

diligence and commitment of journalists to the communities they serve. In contrast to the interviews with national journalists, the findings indicated that local journalists had a stronger sense of social responsibility towards local readers and the local community where Muslims are also included as an integral part of those communities. This aligns with research that local journalism tends to hold a distinctive set of values around their responsibilities to their publics (Firmstone et al, 2022).

Rather than taking a position of professional retreatism, local journalists were able to exercise their agency around how stories involving Muslims were reported with this more inclusive public interest in mind. This meant they were able to over-ride traditional interpretations of objectivity to positively intervene and contribute to redressing existing biases in how Muslims were portrayed in the stories they told. Local journalist Thomas, for example, discussed a local story he had written following a national terrorist attack where he made active efforts to challenge the anti-Muslim narratives found on social media:

> I made a conscious decision to do those stories because I think it's important that the narrative that all Muslims are terrorists is challenged. There's no better opportunity or time to do that than in the aftermath of a terror attack because there would be people going "fucking Mussies" on social media. I think it's important as many people as possible should see it - you know there's a spike in Islamophobia and attacks after every time there is a terror attack.

In Thomas' rejection of taking a wholly objective approach to reporting on stories of terrorism, it is possible to see how the concept of professional retreatism contrasts with a more inclusive approach to journalism. Deuze (2005) describes this type of inclusive approach as one which shifts the orientation of journalists towards a multicultural society where news becomes contextualised and where the positions of minorities are redefined beyond the "othering" narrative. When looking through some stories he had written about Muslims working with other faith leaders, local journalist Elliott similarly highlighted how he consciously sought out alternative stories to challenge prejudices and ensure his readers were better informed about Muslims and Islam:

> I certainly do my fair bit of that because I do think there is a lot of ignorance around Islam at the moment in this country. Islam is a religion of peace, despite people using that line, you know, mockingly.

Adopting such a reflexive approach to objectivity meant that local journalists in the study were able to reject a strictly non-interventionist approach where their personal judgements as journalists were seen to be a potential risk to the veracity of the news story. By accepting this judgement as strength, the journalists instead engaged in a process of the self-reflexive assessment of how and when objectivity should be used (Carlson, 2018) in a way that could lead to fairer and less biased reporting on Muslims. Since research consistently demonstrates the disproportionate media bias against Muslims, this reflexive approach becomes a necessary measure to balance media coverage and counteract existing biases. As local journalist Catherine states:

> I think today when you have so much fake news and when you have such a huge gambit available to you – sometimes you need to point people in the direction maybe? Whether that's truly objective journalism, probably not.

Rather than adopting a position of professional retreatism, the local journalists in the study sought out a more flexible alignment between the ideal of objectivity and the

values at the heart of liberal journalism including public interest and avoiding harming already vulnerable and marginalised sections of society. Ward (2020) refers to this as a form of situated objectivity - an "objectivity with a human face" (5)— where the journalists' own beliefs are held up to personal and public scrutiny. Such an approach involves viewing journalism in terms of engagement rather than detachment, where journalists are objectivity advocates for plural, egalitarian democracy (5). Instead of dismissing the merits of journalistic ideals such as objectivity when it comes to Muslim-related stories, this requires a re-negotiation of the ideal of objectivity in a way that aligns, rather than clashes, with journalistic role performance on a practice level.

Frost (2006) argues that the key differential between the ethics of local journalism and that of national journalism relates to the proximity of the local journalist to the communities they serve. Local newspapers tend to have "distinctive newsroom cultures" that are shaped by these closer relationships to their readers (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2009: 28). In these newsroom cultures, journalists and readers are seen to be part and parcel of a single community with common values and goals. In these specific interviews, the local newspapers were based in cities which had significant Muslim populations. Their social responsibility towards a local readership which included Muslims as an integral part of those communities was prioritised over a more rigid interpretation of professional retreatism. In defining their own interpretations of journalistic norms around their close connections with their audiences, local journalists were able enact their agency in defining how they reported on stories involving marginalised, and often vulnerable sections of their communities.

Hall's conceptualisation of the reproduction of hegemonic interpretations in the media provides a compelling theoretical base for understanding the systemic nature of negative Muslim representation. However, he abandons journalists in a position of structural subordination where their unconscious acceptance of their role to reproduce dominant interpretations means that they cannot act as agents of counter-hegemonic contestation themselves. The study shows that journalists can be both highly conscious and critical of their conceived role in the reproduction of existing media biases and attempt to redress this.

Journalistic role performance supplements Hall's dismissal of agency by considering the tensions journalists experienced through the push-and-pull of the structure-agency dichotomy. It maps these tensions as between the professional constraints that journalists face in their work and the autonomy they have to perform their professional values and norms as they see fit (Hellmueller and Mellado, 2015). In this study, these tensions are often between the structural factors that privilege the reproduction of systematically negative representations and the agency of the journalist to intervene in how stories about Muslims are reported.

Equally importantly, journalistic role performance helps to contextualise the power-relations that underlie journalism practice, i.e., how journalists use role performance to legitimise their work and position in society and their relationship with the publics they serve. Rather than view journalists in a position of relative subordination to higher forces, a journalism role performance perspective approaches journalists' roles as "a complex process of negotiations between the journalists and the different forces that influence their work" (Hellmueller and Mellado, 2015:7-8). Journalists are then seen as

individuals embroiled in constant negotiations between the demands of their media institutions and their responsibilities to the audiences they serve.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on the journalistic ideal of objectivity, the article firstly proposed that Hall's concept of professional retreatism could provide a useful lens to examine how the norms embodied within journalist's professional role could lead to the reproduction of negative media representations of Muslims. The study found some support for Hall's argument that objectivity served as a form of professional retreatism that disempowers journalists to intervene on the stories that they report on, even when they themselves felt ethically compromised. When used ritualistically, without the critical judgements of journalists themselves, objectivity could be seen to contribute to the reproduction of negative representations of Muslims and act as a professional barrier for those journalists wishing to challenge the existing negative media bias. Rather than mitigating bias, this serves to ensure that institutionally prescribed biases are able to permeate throughout media coverage on Muslims. While journalists believe that objectivity as an ideal protects their work from bias, they instead become complicit in reinforcing existing systemic biases.

The professional retreatism adopted by journalists also has an adverse impact on their capacity to value and act upon their agency. Where journalists may want to intervene, for example in redressing the way a particular story about Muslims has been told, objectivity dictates that they adopt a strict non-interventionist approach where personal concerns about a story are disregarded. In this way, journalistic ideals such as objectivity serve to self-police how stories about Muslims are reported, ensuring that the same negative narratives are reproduced in a never-ending cycle. Rather than neutralising bias, norms like objectivity reinforce existing systemic biases against ethnic minorities that are already entrenched within media structures and journalism itself (Budarick, 2022)

The study also reflected the significant tensions around the use of objectivity in journalists' practices. Journalists would oscillate from a position of striving for objectivity to one where they acknowledged that "true" objectivity was not plausible. To make sense of these tensions, it is necessary to supplement Hall's structuralist vision of the role of journalists in the reproduction of media biases with one that considers the gaps between the ideals and practices of journalistic role performance. As found in the examples of the local journalists in this study, journalistic role performance makes space for the autonomy and power of individual journalists to decide how best to report on stories (Mellado and Van Dalen, 2014) in the interests of their publics. It is not surprising that the tensions between the ideals and practices of journalists are often most visible when a more committed reporting stance is called for (Hallin, 2016), such as when it involves marginalised and vulnerable communities.

Recent scholarship on journalistic role performance around the reporting of high-profile social justice events shows the non-interventionist image of the journalist has been put to the test. Schmidt (2023), for example, describes how US journalists and commentators have challenged the norm of objectivity to actively advocate for social justice following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Studies of journalistic role performance across different countries have likewise reported on the tensions that journalists face between the ideal of objectivity and values orientated around advocating social action

to redress inequalities (Harley and Askanius, 2021 in the reporting on the #MeToo movement in Denmark and Sweden) or avoid potential social harms (Mellado et al, 2012 with reference to journalists in Chile, Brazil and Mexico).

This study highlights how journalists can redress how stories involving Muslims are reported by seeking an alignment between objectivity as an ideal of journalistic role performance and its application in practice. The experiences of local journalists contributed a critical normative insight into how the ideal of objectivity can be renegotiated to challenge existing media biases against Muslims. As local journalists were a relatively small sub-sample in this study, it is difficult to extend these findings to apply to local journalism in general. The interviewed journalists all worked in areas with relatively large Muslim populations, which could explain their vested interest in challenging negative representations of Muslims. Other studies indicate that local journalists based in areas with very small Muslim populations may to be less concerned about Muslim-related issues (Holohan and Poole, 2011), and future research is needed on a wider sample of local journalists.

For now, objectivity continues to be a highly contested concept amongst journalism scholars and practitioners (Ruotsalainen, Hujanen and Villi, 2021; Anderson and Schudson, 2019). Journalistic judgements are always implicated within the practice of news production, whether in their choice of whose perspectives are represented, how a story is framed or the interpretation they want to put out to the public. Yet by detaching from the stories they report on, journalists lose sight of the more reflexive ways in which the ideal of objectivity can be engaged in practice for the wider, civic benefit for all society. As Mellado (2019) argues, journalism's professional roles can evolve and be redefined, particularly in light of the commitments that journalists have to their audiences and public interest. By understanding the dilemmas and tensions that journalists experience in reconciling the ideal of objectivity with their everyday practices, it can be argued that a non-interventionist position may not always be aligned to the principle of wider public interest when it comes to the reporting of stories involving marginalised groups including Muslims.

Data Access Statement

Due to confidentiality agreements with research participants, supporting data cannot be made available.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

ORCID

Nadia Haq http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5105-0716

References

Ahmed, S., and J. Matthes. 2017. "Media Representation of Muslims and Islam from 2000 to 2015: A Meta-Analysis." *International Communication Gazette* 79 (3): 219–244. doi:10.1177/1748048516656305.

Anderson, C. W. 2008. "Expertise, Authority, and Power in Democratic Life." In *The Media and Social Theory*, edited by D. Hesmondhalgh, and J. Toynbee, 248–264. London: Routledge.

Anderson, C. W. 2019. "Journalism as Procedure, Journalism as Values." *Journalism* 20 (1): 8–12. doi:10.1177/1464884918806732.

Anderson, C. W., and M. Schudson. 2019. "Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking." In *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, 136–151. Oxon: Routledge.

Andi, S., M. Selva, and R. K. Nielsen. 2020. *Women and Leadership in the News Media 2020: Evidence from Ten Markets*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/women-and-leadership-news-media-2020-evidence-ten-markets#findings (last accessed: 05/01/21).

Baden, C. 2019. "Framing the News." In *Handbook of Journalism Studies*, edited by K. Wahl-Jorgensen, and T. Hanitzsch, 2nd ed., 229–245. New York: Routledge.

Baker, P., C. Gabrielatos, and T. McEnery. 2013. *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bleich, E., H. Stonebraker, H. Nisar, and R. Abdelhamid. 2015. "Media Portrayals of Minorities: Muslims in British Newspaper Headlines, 2001–2012." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41 (6): 942–962. doi:10.1080/1369183X.2014.1002200.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Budarick, J. 2022. "Racism and Journalism: The Dangers of Returning to the 'Safe-Space'of Objectivity." *Journalism* (0,0): 1–17.

Carlson, M. 2018. "Automating Judgment? Algorithmic Judgment, News Knowledge, and Journalistic Professionalism." *New Media & Society* 20 (5): 1755–1772. doi:10.1177/1461444817706684.

Carol, S., and R. Koopmans. 2013. "Dynamics of Contestation Over Islamic Religious Rights in Western Europe." *Ethnicities* 13 (2): 165–190. doi:10.1177/1468796812470893.

Craft, S., and S. Waisbord. 2008. "When Foreign News Remains Foreign Cartoon Controversies in the US and Argentine Press." In *Transnational Media Events: The Mohammed Cartoons and the Imagined Clash of Civilizations*, edited by E. Eide, R. Kunelius, and A. Phillips, 133–148. Göteborg, Sweden: Nordicom.

Deuze, M. 2005. "What is Journalism?" *Journalism* 6 (4): 442–464. doi:10.1177/1464884905056815.

Deuze, M., and T. Witschge. 2018. "Beyond Journalism: Theorizing the Transformation of Journalism." *Journalism* 19 (2): 165–181. doi:10.1177/1464884916688550.

Firmstone, J., J. Steel, M. Conboy, C. Elliott-Harvey, C. Fox, J. Mulderrig, J. Saunders, and P. Wragg. 2022. "Trust and Ethics in Local Journalism: A Distinctive Orientation Towards Responsible Journalism and Ethical Practices." In *Responsible Journalism in Conflicted Societies: Trust and Public Service Across New and Old Divides*, edited by J. Lynch, and C. Rice, 15–29. London: Routledge.

Frost, C. 2006. "Ethics for Local Journalism." In *Local Journalism and Local Media*, edited by B. Franklin, 292–301. Abingdon: Routledge.

Golnaraghi, G., and K. Dye. 2016. "Discourses of Contradiction: A Postcolonial Analysis of Muslim Women and the Veil." *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management* 16 (2): 137–152.

Hall, S. 1974. "Media Power: The Double Bind." *Journal of Communication* 24 (4): 19–26. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00404.x.

Hall, S. 1982. "The Rediscovery of "Ideology": Return of the repressed." In *Media Studies: Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by M. Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Curran, and J. Woollacott, 56–90. New York: Routledge.

Hall, S. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.

Hall, S. 2006. "'Encoding-Decoding." In *Media and Cultural Studies*, edited by M. G. Durham, and D. M. Kellner, 163–173. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Hall, S., C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke, and B. Roberts. 1978. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. London: Macmillan. 2013. Reprint

Hallin, D. C. 2016. "Preface." In *Journalistic Role Performance: Concepts, Contexts, and Methods*, edited by C. Mellado, L. Hellmueller, and W. Donsbach, xi–xvi. New York: Routledge.

Hanitzsch, T., and C. Mellado. 2011. "What Shapes the News Around the World? How Journalists in Eighteen Countries Perceive Influences on Their Work." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 16 (3): 404–426. doi:10.1177/1940161211407334.

Harlow, S., and D. K. Brown. 2022. "Perceptions Versus Performance: How Routines, Norms and Values Influence Journalists' Protest Coverage Decisions." *Journalism* 23 (2): 372–390. doi:10.1177/1464884920983058.

Hartley, J. M., and T. Askanius. 2021. "Activist-Journalism and the Norm of Objectivity: Role Performance in the Reporting of the #MeToo Movement in Denmark and Sweden." *Journalism Practice* 15 (6): 860–877. doi:10.1080/17512786.2020.1805792.

Hellmueller, L., and C. Mellado. 2015. "Professional Roles and News Construction: A Media Sociology Conceptualization of Journalists' Role Conception and Performance." *Communication & Society* 28 (3): 1–12. doi:10.15581/003.28.35948.

Holohan, S., and E. Poole. 2011. *Muslims in the European Mediascape*. Last accessed: 09/09/21. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/9238578/Muslims_in_the_European_Mediascape_UK_Country_Report?email_work_card=title (last accessed: 23/06/2023).

Jenkins, J., and E. C. Tandoc. 2019. "Journalism Under Attack: The Charlie Hebdo Covers and Reconsiderations of Journalistic Norms." *Journalism* 20 (9): 1165–1182. doi:10.1177/1464884917724597.

Karim, K. H. 2002. "Making Sense of the "Islamic Peril": Journalism as Cultural Practice." In *Journalism After September 11*, edited by B. in Zelizer, and S. Allan, 101–106. London: Routledge.

Meer, N., C. Dwyer, and T. Modood. 2010. "Beyond "Angry Muslims"? Reporting Muslim Voices in the British Press." *Journal of Media and Religion* 9 (4): 216–231. doi:10.1080/15348423.2010.521090.

Mellado, C. 2019. *Journalists' Professional Roles and Role Performance. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*.

Mellado, C. 2021. *Beyond Journalistic Norms: Role Performance and News in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Routledge.

Mellado, C., S. V. Moreira, C. Lagos, and M. E. Hernández. 2012. "Comparing Journalism Cultures in Latin America." *International Communication Gazette* 74 (1): 60–77. doi:10.1177/1748048511426994.

Mellado, C., and A. Van Dalen. 2014. "Between Rhetoric and Practice." *Journalism Studies* 15 (6): 859–878. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2013.838046.

Moore, K., P. Mason, and J. M. W. Lewis. 2008. *Images of Islam in the UK: The Representation of British Muslims in the National Print News Media 2000–2008*. Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, 7th July 2008. Available at: http://orca.cf.ac.uk/53005/1/08channel4-dispatches.pdf (last accessed: 29/012021).

Morey, P., and A. Yaqin. 2011. *Framing Muslims*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Opratko, B. 2019. "Devils from our Past: Liberal Islamophobia in Austria as Historicist Racism." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42 (16): 159–176.

Patterson, T. E., and W. Donsbagh. 1996. "News Decisions: Journalists as Partisan Actors." *Political Communication* 13 (4): 455–468. doi:10.1080/10584609.1996.9963131.

Poole, E. 2002. *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Poole, E. 2012. "The Case of Geert Wilders: Multiculturalism, Islam, and Identity in the UK." *Journal of Religion in Europe* 5 (2): 162–191. doi:10.1163/187489212X639181.

Poole, E. 2019. "Covering Diversity." In *Handbook of Journalism Studies*, edited by K. Wahl-Jorgensen, and T. Hanitzsch, 2nd ed., 469–484. New York: Routledge.

Ruotsalainen, J., J. Hujanen, and M. Villi. 2021. "A Future of Journalism Beyond the Objectivity–Dialogue Divide? Hybridity in the News of Entrepreneurial Journalists." *Journalism* 22 (9): 2240–2258. doi:10.1177/1464884919867216.

Schmidt, T. R. 2023. "Challenging Journalistic Objectivity: How Journalists of Color Call for a Reckoning." *Journalism* 0 (0).

Tell MAMA. 2023. A Decade of Anti-Muslim Hate Report. https://tellmamauk.org/a-decade-of-anti-muslim-hate/.

Tuchman, G. 1972. "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity." *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (4): 660–679. doi:10.1086/225193.

Vanparys, N., D. Jacobs, and C. Torrekens. 2013. "The Impact of Dramatic Events on Public Debate Concerning Accommodation of Islam in Europe." *Ethnicities* 13 (2): 209–228. doi:10.1177/1468796812470899.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. 2009. "News Production, Ethnography, and Power: On the Challenges of Newsroom-centricity." In *The Anthropology of News and Journalism: Global Perspectives*, edited by S. E. Bird, 21–34. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ward, S. J. 2020. *Objectively Engaged Journalism: An Ethic*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP.