

Article

Answering for Islam: Journalistic and Islamic Conceptions of Authority

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Abstract: Media representations of Muslims in Britain have often disappointed both faith practitioners and scholars. Imputed failings include distorting beliefs or practices, essentialising the faith, and amplifying voices that are not representative of Islam. This last factor hinges on questions of authority: what journalists and Muslims recognise as authority can differ in important ways. Drawing on studies of journalism practice, prior professional experience, and ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews in Scotland, I discuss the conventional preference among journalists for “official sources” and the problems this can present in terms of hierarchy in Islam. I contrast this with a less-studied imperative, also present in newsrooms, for “real people”. This category matches well with Islam’s decentralised tradition and presents an opportunity to understand how different kinds of sources are presented in media coverage. It is possible for journalists to ensure that these differing claims to authority are represented properly, though this requires knowledge and responsibility.

Keywords: Muslims in Britain; authority; journalism; journalist-source relations; representation; civic journalism; qualitative methods

1. Introduction

Authority is characterised in part by its audience; therefore, authority is relational. Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke examine authority in their edited volume *Speaking for Islam* (Krämer and Schmidtke 2006), and they open with a pair of questions that indicate a shift in audience relevant for this article:

Who speaks for Islam? Who explains to Muslims whether human rights are a legitimate concept ‘in Islam,’ whether there is such a thing as ‘Islamic values’ and what they consist of, and whether violence can ever be justified from a religious point of view? (Krämer and Schmidtke 2006, p. 1)

The first question engages the subject—the one invested with authority—but leaves its audience open: the preposition “for” indicates “on behalf of”. It is only in the second question that the preposition defines this audience: the one with authority is explaining things “to Muslims”, narrowing the addressee to members of the religious community. Authority is thus exercised to articulate the limits of proper belief and practice to the community for which such limits are meaningful.

I am, however, interested in a broader addressee for the first question. Who is authorised to speak for Islam to the wider public, which does not necessarily consider itself Muslim? What this audience desires is not instruction on religious propriety that it can accept or reject for its own life. Rather, it wants information to help it understand an external phenomenon, often but not always with an edge of accountability. “Speaking for Islam” can thus become “answering for Islam”, and journalists are often the primary audience through which the wider public is addressed.

The topics that Krämer and Schmidtke suggest Muslims might want explained, such as rights, values, and the justification of violence, are those journalists want explained as well. Studies on

the representation of Islam and Muslims in Western news media have proliferated since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 (Poole 2002; Richardson 2004; Moore et al. 2008; Baker et al. 2013; Bleich et al. 2015). Kerry Moore and colleagues studied a sample of UK coverage of Islam from 2000 to 2008 and found that two thirds of the stories focused “on Muslims as a threat (in relation to terrorism), a problem (in terms of differences in values) or both (Muslim extremism in general.” (Moore et al. 2008, p. 3). These preoccupations inform the questions for which journalists expect someone from within Islam to be answerable.

Muslims, in turn, argue that this coverage misrepresents Muslims and focuses on sensational topics, employing language that distorts, obscures, or willfully harms Muslims. Social research identifies dissatisfaction among British Muslims with media narratives (Samad 1998; Kabir 2010; Ali and Hopkins 2012; Al-Azami 2016). Even among sources who speak with journalists and contribute to news coverage, the primary word characterising that coverage is “negativity” (Munnik 2018). Muslim organisations in the UK are now countering this narrative: Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) provide resources to equip individual Muslims or community groups to monitor and respond to media coverage (Muslim Engagement and Development n.d.); an informal monitoring campaign on social media has evolved into the Centre for Media Monitoring (Subramanian 2018; Muslim Council of Britain 2018).

Part of the problem is owing to different expectations of journalism. Philip Schlesinger (Schlesinger 1980) noted a wry response from journalists to his ethnography of BBC newsrooms in the 1970s, indicating that sociologists hold journalism to a different, even in their view impractical, standard. Barbie Zelizer (Zelizer 2013), herself a journalist before becoming a scholar, has identified poor communication and mistrust between the academy and the institution of journalism. As well, scholars have argued that the UK media has been a significant carrier of Islamophobia, whether incidentally or deliberately (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia 1997; Saeed 2007; Ogan et al. 2013).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address all of the suggested failings of journalistic coverage of Islam and Muslims. I examine one source that accounts for some of this dissatisfaction: sourcing and the representation of authority—who is made to speak for, or answer for, Islam. John Richardson found that in his survey of British broadsheet representations of Islam, sources whom he classes as “illegitimate (‘terrorist’) organisations are the most frequently quoted Muslim primary source”, amplified to the detriment of Muslims who are not terrorists and who might criticise violent activities (Richardson 2006, p. 112). In Salman Al-Azami’s study of religion in the media, his focus group of Muslim audiences gave “the overwhelming view . . . that the media . . . promoted hate preachers like Anjem Chowdhury [sic] (of Al-Muhajiroun) in such a way that they represented the views of all the Muslims in the world.” (Al-Azami 2016, p. 131). Both scholars and “everyday Muslims” question the representativity of the sources journalists choose when reporting on Muslims in Britain.

How journalists understand source authority and what expectations they have of sources differs from authority within Islamic structures. In the following two sections, I review the literature—first from journalism studies, paying attention to alternative programmes defined as public or civic journalism and considering whether their incorporation of more diverse sources offers a different model for evaluating authority. I then consider how authority is understood in Islam, including recent challenges to traditionally conceived authority. In the fourth section, I observe how these two conceptions manifest among working journalists, drawing on fieldwork conducted in Glasgow, Scotland. From this, I argue that the bespoke demands of authority in journalism make the presentation of Islamic authority a challenge, but that journalists have the capacity to frame Islam’s authority structures within their reporting by making it clear in their stories the ways in which a given source might be authorised. Though this does not account for deliberate, ideological misrepresentations of Islam, it provides some tools for improvements within the broader discussion of religious literacy and responsible journalism (Petley and Richardson 2011).

2. Source Authority in Journalism

Sources are one of several elements that contribute to the selection and construction of news stories, as identified in some of the classic newsroom ethnographies of the 1970s and 80s (Tunstall 1971; Tuchman 1978; Gans 1980; Fishman 1980; Schlesinger 1987). Herbert Gans, writing about US national news media, suggests that of all such contributing elements, “those governing the choice of sources are of prime significance” (Gans 1980, p. 281), and Jeremy Tunstall, looking at specialist correspondents in UK print media, says journalists who report news—“gatherers”, rather than editors or, as he calls them, “processors”—are “oriented towards their news sources” above any consideration for audience or rival journalists (Tunstall 1971, p. 30). These observations provide the foundation for research into journalist-source relations, a key element of the study of media production. Beyond their relationship to the news makers, source statements and activities provide the stuff of news itself. Studies have attempted to identify news values to determine what gets covered and what does not (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O’Neill 2001, 2017), but such lists are derived from coverage, whereas ethnographic production studies are better equipped to assess the processes of news selection. Richard Ericson and colleagues define news as “a representation of authority. In the contemporary knowledge society news represents *who* are the authorized knowers and *what* are their authoritative versions of reality.” (Ericson et al. 1989, p. 3). To discuss source authority, then, we must begin by considering sources themselves. Who are they, and what influence do they have on journalists, their practices, and the stories that are eventually published?

Gans defines sources as “actors whom journalists observe or interview . . . [and] the most salient characteristic of sources is that they provide information as members or representatives of organized and unorganized interest groups, and yet larger sectors of nation and society.” (Gans 1980, p. 80). This definition is broad enough to encompass a range of sources in terms of their authority, as they can be but are not necessarily “representatives” and the groups to which they are attached can be “organized or unorganized”.

Yet both journalists and scholars make distinctions within that range. The typical distinction is between official and unofficial sources, and these designations are bound up in power and authority. Gans notes that “[p]owerful or skilled sources know how to make contact with reporters; but many people—perhaps most—lack this knowledge.” (Gans 1980, p. 125). Those elite few become effective at advancing the goals and messages of their organisation. Stuart Hall and colleagues call them “primary definers” who enjoy a “structured preference . . . [to] establish the initial definition” of an issue or problem in the news media (Hall et al. 1978, p. 58). Journalists, in this analysis, are not mere ciphers who transmit the views of these powerful groups, but they do reproduce these groups’ definitions within the debate. David Miller and colleagues from the Glasgow Media Group similarly identified this in reporting about AIDS in Britain: various source communities spoke to the issue, but the scholars found “structural inequality between organisations in the field. These inequalities are the outcome of the financial, institutional and cultural resources available to source organisations.” (Miller et al. 1998, pp. 123–24). Schlesinger (Schlesinger 1990) recognises the inequality of resources available to sources, though he rejects the assumption implied in Hall’s “primary definition” that powerful, official sources have automatic access to the media narratives; rather, he views access to the news as an accomplishment that sources achieve again and again in the cycle of news.

This characterises the work of source communities to get their messages in the news, but the relationship is two-way: journalists also contact sources for information or comment, whether or not those sources want to be in the news. Nonetheless, whom they prioritise for contact is also structurally supported in favour of official sources. Sociologist Mark Fishman (Fishman 1980) studied the practices of beat reporters at a California newspaper, noting how the demands on their professional time made the routines of official sources key to their success. By having particular bureaucratic sources they could turn to—the city council, the courthouse, the police department—reporters could cover news efficiently. This information was “right” or factual because of its connection to the governmental and state authorities: for a police spokesperson to say a certain individual was charged with a crime

was correct because the police had done the charging; for a courthouse spokesperson to say that individual was found guilty was correct because the judge had convicted her. The material was trusted because it was true and efficient because it was easy, and so this reliance on official sources became routinised; Oscar Gandy, in a separate but contemporary study, calls such routines “information subsidies” (Gandy 1982). Official sources become, in Fishman’s useful phrase, “socially authorized and socially sanctioned knowers” (Fishman 1980, p. 95), distinct from non-bureaucratic sources who cannot benefit from the assumption of the facticity of what they say.

Just as journalists can become socialised into prioritising official sources, scholars can imagine such source relations to be the only ones that matter. In his critique of media production research, Schlesinger finds that “[e]mpirical studies . . . have largely failed to investigate the forms of action adopted by non-official sources.” (Schlesinger 1990, p. 76). We see this absolutism in the introduction to Ericson and colleagues’ comprehensive study of crime reporting in Canada in the 1980s:

It is hard to imagine a mainstream newscast or newspaper that cites only the man on the street, the cop on the beat, the hospital porter, the House of Commons backbencher, the university student, and the clerk of the court. It is thus easy to see why they must cite the executive in his office, the chief of police, the hospital administrator, the cabinet minister, the professor, and the chief justice. These are the people who are recognized socially to be in a position to know. (Ericson et al. 1989, p. 4)

This thought experiment, with the ring of common sense, yields to a naturalistic fallacy. Their rhetoric overstates the case: the word “only” in their first sentence presents a straw man. No one would suggest that news reports “only” focus on everyday workers or other non-official sources. Such reports would lack due attention to the big picture and to events and decisions of communal importance. Ericson and colleagues tell us that journalists “must” include official sources, but we could easily imagine the converse in which news reports “only” publish such voices. Advocates of public or civic journalism, as we see below, criticise reports of this kind as out of touch with the public and limited to a narrow, bureaucratic definition of what matters in society. Similarly, Fishman noted that journalists with a particular beat or specialism might learn things outside the bureaucratic system, such as crime reporters receiving victim or witness testimonies. Yet they hold off reporting such accounts until the events have manifested in the bureaucratic system—a suspect is charged or appears in court. Until such authorised knowers validate the information, it is “officially invisible” (Fishman 1980, p. 76).

More- or Less-Official Sources and “Real People”

The binary pairing of official and unofficial or non-official sources makes, I believe, too blunt a delineation. Paul Manning defines official sources as those “associated with the apparatus of government and the state”; everyone else is, therefore, unofficial (Manning 2001, p. 140). This restriction ignores the authorisation that comes from being a representative body or holding capital, especially financial capital. Thus the chief executive officer of an international bank—the kind of source Ericson and colleagues would recognise as authorised knowers—sits uncomfortably within the category of “unofficial sources.” I suggest that Manning’s state associations are better classed as “bureaucratic,” a term which features repeatedly in Fishman’s study of news routines. Journalist and linguist Allan Bell considers this designation as a threshold of activity: non-bureaucratic sources typically need to be doing something in order to make the news, whereas authorised bureaucratic sources can accomplish things by saying them: “Talk is news only if the right person is talking.” (Bell 1991, p. 131; cf. Austin 1975).

David Deacon has noted further that in the sphere of voluntary organisations, to which he accords unofficial status, we can still find a range from “small community-based groups operating on a financial shoestring to large, highly professionalized, international organizations controlling millions of pounds.” (Deacon 1996, p. 176). Robert Hackett (Hackett 1985) proposed a “hierarchy of access” which demonstrates this unequal distribution of power in a fine-grained ranking, demonstrating not

only the greater access and influence of bureaucratic sources but the various uses to which the source types are put. Binary oppositions, then, are insufficient for analysing the distribution of power among journalists' sources. In its place, I propose applying a spectrum of more- or less-official sources, making the conditions of each source a matter of empirical study.

Beyond the spectrum of more- or less-official sources, there are truly unofficial sources. Informed by both scholarship and my prior professional practice, I refer to such sources as "real people".¹ Research on this topic is sometimes embedded in assessments of what is called civic or public journalism (Glasser 1999; Rosen 1999). The movement "celebrates the absence of clear and precise definitions," but in its various expressions, it attempts to bring institutional journalism closer to the interests, and in many cases the voices, of the people (Glasser 1999, p. 5). Results concerning sources are mixed: Brian Massey (Massey 1998) found numbers of "non-elite" sources in civic journalism experiments increased, but their prominence in stories did not; David Kurpius (Kurpius 2002), however, found that civic journalism practices did improve the diversity of sources. Joyce Nip ventured a list of the broad qualities and preoccupations of civic journalism, including the practice of "giving ordinary people a voice," which includes a reference to "real people", set off in quotation marks as I do (Nip 2008, p. 180). Nip conducted an ethnography of a daily newspaper in Savannah, Georgia, to discover whether the practices of civic journalism were still present in a committed newsroom several years after the movement was first articulated. Some of these practices had been routinised, but others—especially "mechanisms of active listening to the community"—were not (Nip 2008, pp. 191–92). "Real people" also feature as a category of sources in David Kenamer and Jeff South's comparison of civic and traditional news coverage of the 2000 election in the state of Virginia (Kenamer and South 2002, p. 43). More recently, and outside of the US context, where so much of the research on civic journalism has taken place, scholars have noted how technology has increased the presence and prominence of "ordinary people" in Belgian newspapers (De Keyser and Raeymaeckers 2012). A team of Dutch scholars concurred but determined that this presence was largely through the use of "vox pops" and thus not a substantive contribution to the news (Kleemans et al. 2015). Zvi Reich's (Reich 2015) study of sources in Israeli news similarly shows a negligible contribution from "ordinary citizens".

Journalists using the term "real people" are distinguishing a type of source from those with an agenda or a bureaucratic role. Andrew Garbett and colleagues, in evaluating how BBC journalists in London recruited sources from the community, quote one journalist who wanted "'a real people file'" in contrast to "'the expert file'": such sources made news "more engaging," but their non-institutional character made them difficult to identify and recruit (Garbett et al. 2014, p. 5). They are conceived of as ordinary people to whom things happen or who do particular things that express wider stories in the community. The more organised a group becomes, the less inclined journalists are to consider its members "real people": Garbett and colleagues note that even "citizen journalists" such as bloggers did not fit their participants' definition of "real people", though they were imagined as a potential conduit to such sources (Garbett et al. 2014, pp. 5–6). To the extent that journalists fear the intrusion of "spin" (Sumpter and Tankard 1994; McNair 2004), "real people", in an ideal sense, do not spin stories: they are honest, and they merely relate a narrative from their experience. The quality of honesty allows "real people" to function, for journalists, as a kind of Everyman to which the putative audience connects as it cannot a politician, a committee chair, or an academic expert. "Real people", then, can be understood as a counter-trend to the reliance on bureaucratic or more-official sources.

¹ For eight years, I worked in public broadcasting in Canada. The newsroom I worked in adopted a public journalism campaign in the mid-2000s, conducting demographic analysis of the city, comparing this analysis with the categories of voices present in our coverage, and actively cultivating source relationships with categories that were absent from that coverage (Munnik 2016). Even prior to this experiment, producers insisted on the use of "real people" as a valuable addition to stories.

3. Authority in Islam

Authority in Islam starts with the Prophet Muhammad, who embodies, in some ways, an archetype of Max Weber's idea of charismatic authority (Weber 1968). The question facing early Muslims was how to effect this authority after his death. On the one hand, the revealed scripture provides a large measure of guidance: the Qur'an is full of instruction. Furthermore, the *sunna* or the example of the Prophet gives clarity to the prescriptive nature of Islam. The sayings of the Prophet and stories attributed to him begin an interrogative process of authority, by which Muslims ask for answers concerning what God wants of them in a specific circumstance.

These bodies of knowledge, however, do not speak for themselves, and so the interpreting community becomes an additional source of authority. As Krämer and Schmidtke write, "[t]o deal with the Qur'an and *sunna* not just as a source of moral guidance but as normative textual proof regulating human activity in all spheres of life requires expert knowledge, a knowledge premised on a minimum level of literacy and the requisite training" (Krämer and Schmidtke 2006, p. 5). The authorisation of individuals is a social process, contingent and developing. Authorising one version closes down another, and competition for primacy characterised the early period of the formation of Islam (Berkey 2003). Hamid Dabashi, following the Orientalist scholar Montgomery Watt, perceives that "[o]rthodox' and 'heterodox' are polemical, not hermeneutic terms" (Dabashi 2002, p. 71). Dabashi considers different solutions to the continuation of Muhammad's authority and the correct interpretation of scripture that jostled for legitimacy in the first years after the Prophet's death; these would develop, in time, to what we recognise as Sunni and Shi'ite positions, as well as a broad envelope of approaches and doctrines collectively classed as Kharijite. Rather than taking a theological position on the correctness of one branch or another, Dabashi looks urges us to look sociologically at "the particular position that they maintain vis-à-vis Muhammad's charismatic legacy." (Dabashi 2002, p. 72).

The two expressions that comprise the majority of Islam globally have formalised and routinised their positions. Underpinned by the fundamental insistence in Islam on *tawhid* or the oneness of God, these structures give a certainty and rigidity to the interpretations of the authorised interpreters. Infallibility is attributed in Shi'ite Islam to the Imams, given additional political expression in current-day Iran through the doctrine of *velayat-e-faqih* (Amirpur 2006); for Sunnis, it is manifest in the idea of consensus of scholars or *ulama* (Berkey 2003; Zaman 2006). Yet rigid authority is not the only ingredient in effective authority: Dabashi writes that "[n]o claim to authority, in its bid to offer a superseding culture, can survive without a built-in remissive motif that gives the interdictory motif flexibility and thus authority." (Dabashi 2002, p. 154). For the more centralised Shi'ite structures, this flexibility comes from the mystical, hidden knowledge ingredient in the Imam's authority (Robinson 2009, p. 341). For Sunnis, the diffusion of authoritative interpretation across four schools or *madahib* has fostered "[t]he plurality of Islamic thought" over time and context (Bano 2018a; for practical examples of this, see Zaman 2002). This mixture of rigidity and flexibility has allowed Islamic authority to endure and adapt over fourteen centuries, mutable political environments, and global migration.

Scholars have identified a new set of figures claiming religious authority within Islam, outside the traditional structures. Technology has driven this change—first through the development of print and now through the spread of digital media. Historian Francis Robinson (Robinson 1993) identified print as a disruption to the typical method of transmitting knowledge in Islam: the primacy on oral transmission, memorisation, and the *ijaza* as the certification of a scholar's knowledge are part of the routinisation described above. Print was adopted late in South Asian Muslim societies, for the purpose of defending against colonialism, and it fostered three religious changes there: what he calls "Islamic protestantism", or a sense of the sufficiency of accurate scriptural knowledge; a wider ummatic consciousness; and "the erosion of the authority of the ulama as interpreters of Islam." (Robinson 1993, pp. 242–44). Books could be consulted and interpreted by, as it were, "real people": in Robinson's memorable phrase, "any Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad could claim to speak for Islam." (Robinson 1993, p. 245). Peter Mandaville considers this in the context of transnational Muslim communities in late-twentieth and early twenty-first century Britain, where the increase of digital media

has “fragment[ed] traditional sources of authority such that the locus of ‘real’ Islam and the identity of those who are permitted to speak on its behalf become ambiguous.” (Mandaville 2001, p. 176). John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed (Esposito and Mogahed 2007), interpreting the findings of a global Gallup poll among Muslims following 9/11, take this to the extreme: the title of their book asks *Who Speaks for Islam?* The subtitle, *What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, implicitly answers, “everyone.”

Muhammad Qasim Zaman is quick to discourage us from exaggerating this erosion: the *ulama* have proved capable of adapting to technological changes, with both the early adoption of print and more recently, as with the example of *alim* Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Internet (Zaman 2002, 2006). Yet there emerges the challenge of what is called the “new Muslim intellectual” (or “Islamist new intellectual” or “Muslim activist intellectual”; see Roy 1994; Abu-Rabi’ 1996; Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Esposito and Voll 2001; Kersten 2011). In contrasting their status with the rationalised *ulama*, scholars note that these figures are “Sufi *shaykhs*, engineers, professors of education, medical doctors, army and militia leaders, and others” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, p. 131; cf. Cesari 2004, p. 115). However, while this range of backgrounds can serve tacitly to derogate these scholars, the characterisation can occlude the depth of their study and knowledge base—a base that is not restricted, however, to Islamic tradition but also “Western civilisation, now so freely made available by print, to find answers to contemporary challenges.” (Robinson 1993, p. 246). This recourse to a wide base of knowledge and the need to address contemporary challenges distinguishes what authority is increasingly seen to demand.

Masooda Bano attempted to capture both sides in her recent project studying modern Islamic authority. Her research engaged both traditional institutions that train *ulama* such as Cairo’s al-Azhar and the Dar-ul-Uloom in Deoband (Bano 2018a) as well as newer institutions and scholars in non-Muslim-majority contexts such as Zaytuna College and Ebrahim College, Hamza Yusuf and Tariq Ramadan (Bano 2018b). For Bano, authority in Islam is derived from three sources: knowledge of Qur’an and sunna, or *ilm*; the moral authority of the scholar, or *adab*; and their ability to relate to the realities of the current context (Bano 2018a, pp. 30–31). It is this third quality, Bano argues that contributes to the increased prominence of these new Muslim intellectuals, though she agrees with Zaman that this does not necessarily mean *ulama* are irrelevant or failing to adapt to this new environment. However, she notes that the “primary audience” of these new leaders are “university-educated Muslims” living, working, and studying in the West, who are trained to recognise arguments that speak to and reflect their context (Bano 2018b, p. 25).

This attentiveness to audience returns to the point with which I opened this essay, namely that authority is relational and is conditioned by the addressee. Krämer and Schmidtke note that “it is the willingness of *others* to credit any given person, group or institution with religious authority that ultimately renders it effective.” (Krämer and Schmidtke 2006, p. 2, emphasis original). Mandaville, reflecting on British Muslims apart from the Muslim-majority context from which so many came, writes that “[s]ources of social authority are received and understood in a variety of ways by a given political community, and often this reception will be dependent on where they (community *and* authority) are located within the social discourse of a particular time and place. Social authority is hence never immutable.” (Mandaville 2001, p. 80, emphasis original). As we shall see, this can create challenges for journalists who are presented with authority that is not fixed or stable, and these journalists will often lack the training to recognise how these authorities are being received by their political communities.

One final point on the religious and social authority of Islamic leaders needs addressing here, and that is the role of the imam in the contemporary UK context. Jocelyne Cesari identifies a range of leadership types in twenty-first century Islam, and one telling figure is not the “new Muslim intellectual” described above but what she calls the “parochial leader” (Cesari 2004). This type, Cesari finds, has superseded the “bureaucratic leader” who represented diasporic Muslim communities by maintaining links with the Muslim-majority countries from which these people migrated in the second half of the twentieth century. Parochial leaders “are similar to Catholic priests or Protestant pastors, who have traditionally derived their authority from the local parish.” (Cesari 2004, p. 127). Imams take—or are given—a central role in affairs surrounding the mosque for which they have responsibility

and the Muslims who come for worship and community activities. Unlike imams in Muslim-majority contexts, who are more like civil servants and have prescribed activities, such a leader “is imam, *cadi*, mufti, and teacher all at once; he presides over burials, represents the community in official ceremonies, and so on. The list of his roles both within and without the religious community is potentially endless.” (Cesari 2004, p. 130). Though participants in my study suggested “the imam” did not hold such responsibility in Britain, we shall nonetheless see how this construction of authority conditions ways of thinking about representative leadership.

4. Source and Authority in Reporting Islam: A Fieldwork Example

I conducted research between August 2012 and March 2014 in Glasgow, Scotland, using interviews and participant observation to examine relations between journalists and sources in the construction of news about Islam and Muslims. Part of my project inquired into how journalists conceived of Islam as a subject and Muslims as sources of or part of the content within their reports. It is from these data that I derive my insights into the question of how journalists understand authority.

Out of thirty interview participants, twelve were journalists. Three others were classed as sources but either had occupied journalistic roles previously or had some measure of news work at the time of my study; to the extent that they spoke in our interviews “as journalists”, I have included their insights on sources. They worked for a range of mainstream news organisations in both print and broadcast, tabloid and broadsheet, and occupied both reporter and editor roles. One of the journalists identified as Muslim. My sampling was purposive, seeking to include journalists who had reported on Islam or Muslims at some point in their career. Participation in the study was voluntary, and due to the public nature of their work, I offered to either disclose or anonymise their identity, as they wished. Anonymised participants are given descriptive, general titles, though I have tried as much as possible not to identify any of the participants, as it is irrelevant to this analysis.

During our interviews, I asked specific questions about Muslim sources they spoke with; I also asked about stories they had worked on or might consider as newsworthy, and some source types were generated from these answers. I transcribed the interviews—verbatim for those I had recorded and in summary form for the others—and coded these transcripts. From this, I developed a list of Muslim sources in the journalistic ecosystem of Glasgow and Scotland. The list includes both individuals and groups or institutions, specific sources and generalised types, and actual and hypothetical sources.

4.1. More- or Less-Official Sources and Authority

All but one of the specific sources in Table 1 would be classed as more- or less-official (I discuss Faiza Amjid below). They are organised and unorganised interest groups or representatives thereof, following Gans’s broad definition. Politicians such as Humza Yousaf and Soriya Siddique, and councillors generally, have bureaucratic authorisation to make things happen. Others, such as lawyer Aamer Anwar and charity director Robina Qureshi, have authority within their professional roles. Few, however, occupy an explicitly religious position. None of the specific or general sources is an *alim*, and none of the journalists in my study even mentioned the word. Some of the named sources could be described, as one journalist did, as “Muslim commentator”, but their authority derives more from their articulateness and identification with Islam than any religious training: Abdel Bari Atwan is a journalist (in London, not Glasgow), and Azeem Ibrahim positions himself as a policy consultant, though he has written about Islamic extremism and the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar. Institutions such as Radio Ramadhan, Amina, and the Muslim Council of Scotland offer support for a religiously defined community, though the work of the latter two often encompasses social and political matters. Similarly, Osama Saeed was for a time a spokesperson for the Muslim Association of Britain and the Scottish-Islamic Foundation, which took on social and political advocacy for Muslims. I would not class any of these sources as “new Muslim intellectuals” of the kind described above: they do not activate any religious authority, though they may be called upon by journalists to answer for Islam, as I discuss below. Following the terminology from Stephen Jones and colleagues, such sources have

“standing” in terms of esteem and a social role but not “authority” in a specifically religious sense (Jones et al. 2015, pp. 216–18). It is also worth noting that these sources represent an expansion of source diversity from Richardson’s earlier study, notable for its “relative absence of authoritative sources” who were Muslim (Richardson 2006, p. 113); his list, of course, derives from a content study, whereas my list comes from interview data.

Table 1. Muslim sources mentioned by journalists in Glasgow, Scotland.

Specific Sources—Groups/Institutions	Specific Sources—Individuals	Generalised Types
AMINA—Muslim Women’s Resource Centre	Faiza Amjid	Allison Street residents and shop owners
Awaz FM	Aamer Anwar	Councillors
East Renfrewshire mosque group	Abdel Bari Atwan	Informal networks
Feed Glasgow	Azeem Ibrahim	<i>Mrs. Gupta/Mrs. Gandhi</i> ¹
Glasgow Central Mosque	Robina Qureshi	Muslim women who do or do not wear the veil
Govanhill Baths Community Trust	Osama Saeed	Second- or third-generation Muslims
Govanhill Housing Association	Soriya Siddique	The imam
Muslim Council of Scotland	Humza Yousaf	The mosque
Radio Ramadhan		Women converts
		<i>Young people breaking Ramadan fast at McDonald’s</i>
		<i>Younger generation who understand how media work</i>

¹ Items in italics are hypothetical sources.

Several journalists referred to “the mosque” and “the imam” as a general category, with some also discussing specific communities: the Glasgow Central Mosque and a group attempting to establish a mosque in East Renfrewshire, a suburb of the city. Several of those participants suggested “the mosque” was insufficient for and “the imam” not interested or not able to meet journalists’ needs. Two participants caricatured journalists “going to the mosque” or “ringing up the imam” for comment: the former was pitched as a kind of low-hanging fruit, suggesting that their less informed colleagues associate Islam with religion, determine the mosque as “where Muslims go to pray,” and think no further about where and how to access Glasgow’s Muslims. The typical imam was presented as too old (“80”), unversed in English, and not inclined to give any comment to the press anyway. For some, the mosque in general, or the Glasgow Central Mosque in particular, was out of touch with real Muslims, real attitudes, or real events. The East Renfrewshire mosque group was classed as a good story, though a difficult one to tell: one journalist used ideal types to describe it, referring again to the “poor 80-year-old guy” whose “English is poor” and will not speak on the record. The second type he invoked is “the younger set—guys in their forties, fifties, sixties, born in the UK”. These sources were deemed good for information but ultimately not useful because of their reluctance to be quoted publicly.

This set of descriptions contrasts with Cesari’s depiction of the imam as a parochial leader who accomplishes a range of authorised tasks for Muslims within their notional parish. I attribute some of this attitude to a desire to appear knowledgeable and current in the interview context: some of the journalists may have wished to position themselves as better than others in the industry when speaking with a university researcher on Islam. The role of the British imam has changed significantly, and more research is needed to capture this professional figure. In time, findings may trickle down to the

consciousness of working journalists. It is also the case, though, that the parochial frame does not reflect the kind of authority these journalists were interested in. One journalist put it to me that “the faith has no phone.” He was demonstrating knowledge of Islam’s non-hierarchical and decentralised structure. Another mentioned colleagues asking why there was no “Muslim pope.” The word “pope” is resonant for Glasgow’s Christian sectarian context, where the models of Catholicism and Presbyterianism offer contrasting examples of authority. The Catholic Church is hierarchical: when the archbishop speaks for Catholics, he does so with some clout, because he is institutionally charged with administering faith matters in the archdiocese. Even the press officer at the archdiocese is authorised in a particular way (though see [Beaudoin 2012](#)). The Church of Scotland is decentralised: though there is a head office in Edinburgh, it does not speak “for” the denomination or its members. From what participants told me, the simplicity of the strong Catholic structure makes it journalistically useful.²

Structurally, Islam resembles Presbyterian decentralisation. Yet some sources from some Muslim groups in the city do position themselves as spokespeople. This is the context in which one journalist told me about “the younger generation, who understand how media work”, mentioned on Table 1. He said these sources tired of what they perceived as a fumbling articulation of public views from their elders in the faith and started presenting themselves to journalists, organising voluntary coalitions, and issuing press releases. This work grew in response to 9/11 ([Munnik 2017](#)), when journalistic interest in Muslims also grew. He said they were careful not to overstate their authority or representativeness, but they spoke with strength and verve, unafraid of being controversial. Participants compared this expression of Islam to the Catholic archdiocese leaders, who articulate a clear and controversial view on moral matters. They suggested that these kinds of sources are better positioned to control the direction of a story and generate effective and ongoing coverage of an issue.

Thus, out of a familiarity with technology and British media discourse, and responding to a need from journalists for comment, this category of source appropriates authority. These dimensions are similar to what scholars have observed in the “new Muslim intellectual” type described above. Crucially, though, they are not speaking *about* Islam *to* Muslims, though they are answering *for* Islam *to* the wider public. As much, for example, as Osama Saeed was invited to rebut statements by Anjem Choudary in the Scottish media, both are elevated to a representative status that may be more useful for journalists than for Muslims. One journalist spoke of his awareness of the need for caution and information: “I get the impression that a lot of the people we go to as kind of Muslim leaders are not viewed as such by lots of Muslims. That makes it hard.” He advocated journalists becoming more familiar with Muslim communities as a way of improving on that tendency, but he also appealed to Muslims to make it “a bit more clear” who the satisfactory spokespeople are. The answer, of course, can be posed as a question: who is satisfactorily representative depends on whom you ask.

4.2. “Real People” and Authority in Islam

Several of the sources listed on Table 1 would be classed as unofficial, or what I am calling “real people”. They lack the authority markers that officialise them, though they are sought as sources because of the religious dimension of their activity. All but one are generalised types rather than specific individuals or groups, and they were a mixture of actual examples that journalists had engaged for stories, such as “Allison Street residents and shopkeepers” or “women who do or do not wear the veil”, or hypothetical examples who could be engaged for an imagined story, such as “young people breaking their Ramadan fast at McDonald’s”. “Mrs. Gupta”/“Mrs. Gandhi” is a hypothetical but concrete construction raised by two different journalists as a counterpoint to an equally hypothetical

² It is worth noting that the presence of a “Muslim pope” or, less crudely, a phone for the faith, is no guarantee against negative coverage. Though Catholic leaders in Scotland have a clear and distinctive communication protocol, the church has nevertheless been embroiled in reports of scandal and negativity (e.g., [Deveney 2013](#)); neither are Muslims in Britain languishing in obscurity and hoping for more presence in the news media. It is the quality, not the quantity, of coverage that concerns Muslims and scholars alike.

ethnic Scottish woman. In one case, “Mrs. Gupta” was offered instead of “Mrs. Smith” as a local shopkeeper who could be included in a story for which the person’s religion was irrelevant. In the other, “Mrs. Gandhi” was counterpoised with “Mrs. Beattie” in a hypothetical news story that would not be news at all if it had happened to a white, Christian person. The specific example is Faiza Amjid, a young Muslim woman commissioned to write an opinion piece on her decision not to wear the veil.

“Women converts” refers to a collection of sources featured by one journalist in profiles for a tabloid newspaper. These sources were quoted concerning their religious feelings or motivations, but they are not religious authorities, and the fact of their conversion is not in itself newsworthy enough to merit the story. One was featured because she was moving with her family to Baghdad in 2004; another received coverage because he had published a memoir. A qualified exception is the profile of Gillian Amin, an “ordinary” Scot whose conversion was used as a local example to follow national news that Lauren Booth, sister-in-law of former prime minister Tony Blair, had converted to Islam. Though the type “second- or third-generation Muslims” seems similar to the younger generation type discussed above, the latter has some authority in the way the journalist described it that places it on the spectrum of more- or less-official sources. The former denotes a “real people” designation which identifies groups of Muslims who are the children or grandchildren of immigrants. Not all of them are familiar with media needs and priorities, and this lack of familiarity may in fact make them more attractive to journalists seeking sources for certain kinds of stories.

As I mentioned above, “real people” have the advantage of being without spin, in the imagination of journalists. One journalist described a story idea proposed in her newsroom during Ramadan that was interesting but “too late” to pursue. Ramadan occurred in the summer in 2013, and the journalists considered school-aged children who might be fasting during the day while taking physical education classes which would require them to run and be active in an unusually hot summer with no opportunity to drink water: how were they coping, and what measures might schools take to accommodate them? I asked how she would have pursued the story if it had been assigned, and the first problem she described was that of finding sources. After identifying schools with a high population of Muslims, she would still face the problem of accessing people. She said she could use “official channels,” such as the mosque or the Muslim Council of Scotland, as conduits; but if she wanted “real people,” she might devise an elaborate scheme such as visiting McDonald’s restaurant at sunset to “see who turns up.” Her tone of voice indicated that the “official channels” did not present a satisfactory solution and that although the trip to McDonald’s was logistically more complicated and did not guarantee finding an appropriate source, it was her preferred option and worth the effort. What made it worth the effort was authenticity. Sources arranged by a representative body may have been selected and even coached on what to say to provide the desired public representation of Islam. “Real people” were depicted as a guileless alternative.

A second example comes from a journalist discussing the 2007 attack on Glasgow Airport. She said her organisation struggled with the story: journalists did not “misreport” the story, in that they got details correct and were prudent in their assumptions about the perpetrators and their connection to the wider community of Arabs, Asians, or Muslims. However, she said they had none of the added value of human stories and insights that would come from having “close connections” with the city’s Muslims. Part of this, she said, was because of the composition of their newsroom: it is hard to get good Muslim contacts if there are no Muslims working for the organisation. Moreover, a large mainstream news organisation can be intimidating, and “real people” and “even experts” may be nervous about commenting on the record. They may not even know how to reach journalists or the newsroom, as email addresses and phone numbers are not readily accessible to the public.

5. Conclusions

Considering the range of sources identified by journalists in my study, we can see features that indicate how authority is understood in relation to the production of news about Islam. More- or less-official sources outweighed “real people” by twenty to seven (the type “informal networks” was

sufficiently vague to stand outside either category), which squares with the literature that indicates a journalistic preference for official sources. Yet the majority of the named groups and institutions, though Muslim, or with responsibility in Muslim communities, are socially authorised to know about things that are not religious. Journalists would be more likely to call Humza Yousaf, a Member of Scottish Parliament and cabinet minister in the Scottish National Party's government, about independence or, given his secretarial role at the time, foreign policy than the appropriateness of schoolteachers wearing a *niqab*. Conversely, the "real people" mentioned were more likely to be contacted because of the religious dimension of their life and activity—converting, fasting during Ramadan, choosing to wear or not wear the veil. To the extent that they are socially authorised to know things, it is the role of religion in their lives that they know. Jeroen De Keyser and Karin Raeymaeckers identified this increased authority conferred on "real people" in their Flemish study, calling it "expertise by experience" (De Keyser and Raeymaeckers 2012, p. 828). Journalists in my sample use them as, in their parlance, "case studies" to illustrate the event or idea in their stories.

These sources are not trained scholars—neither *ulama* or Shi'ite Imams nor "new Muslim intellectuals", and seldom parochial leaders. Though, as Robinson notes, the transfer of Islamic learning to print has democratised access to knowledge, the interpretation of that learning still demands a social context. The apparatus that validates authority in Islam has been shifting, as scholars in this special issue have identified, but this is concerned with authority that addresses a Muslim audience. Journalists, seeking answers on behalf of a wider, largely non-Muslim public, are looking for something else. As the discussion about the preference for hierarchical over decentralised structures shows, journalists may be more receptive to the rigidity of Islamic authority than its flexibility. This is consonant with the majority view in scholarship that journalists favour official, authoritative sources. It means, however, that sources who position themselves thus risk critique from other Muslims that they are not speaking for Islam—or at least not for "their" Islam.

As I have demonstrated in this paper, journalism and Islam make different demands of authority, and it is expressed in different ways. The most authoritative voices in Islam are not represented in most journalistic coverage of the faith, but at the same time, the kinds of questions journalists are interested in are not always ones they need such sources for. The social challenges of building a mosque in East Renfrewshire or fasting during hot summer days and school PE lessons do not require expert knowledge of the Qur'an and sunna or the exemplary conduct of the speaker. Though the best sources for such a story may not be as forthcoming as the journalists would like, the solution does not lie in the shifting terrain of Islamic authority.

When the questions move to topics such as rights, values, and the justification of violence, religious authority is a present concern. My hope with this paper is to indicate the complexity of the question and the necessity of carefully selecting to whom the journalist gives authority. Journalists need a little knowledge and some awareness of the sensitivity of the issue, examining not only who presents themselves as an authoritative voice but how that authority is constructed. Who makes up the political community activated by the speaker, and what is the social discourse of that particular time and place? Journalists in this study spoke to me from their occupational and operational perspective; yet, as scholars, we are able to observe wider patterns concerning sourcing strategies and other considerations that bear on how news is constructed. Understanding their priorities and how they justify their actions does not mean we cannot point out the socially problematic consequences they create. In addition, from within the communities of practice themselves, it may yet be the case that some British Muslims will criticise those whom journalists choose to answer for Islam on a particular question. Fourteen centuries of flexibility, growth, and change suggest that this is a normal state of affairs and one that can be absorbed in the continuum of history.

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