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# What Style Guides Tell Secular Journalists about Muslims and Islam

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## Abstract

Journalists in secular contexts report – accurately and fairly, we hope – on religious communities and events. Quantitative studies of media content and discourse have suggested a rise in reporting on religion in general and, since 9/11, Islam in particular, with misrepresentations and negative representations. I draw on findings from a new study evaluating journalistic style guides on their representation of Muslims and Islam. A researcher and I reviewed academic literature on style guides, surveyed news organisations across the UK for the tools they use, and assessed those tools. In this paper, I consider the representations that emerge in ten different resources, ranging from in-house style guides to documents prepared by charities and even that most basic of resources – the dictionary. I consider their ease of use, their currency, and the quality of their contents. I am also attentive to the political context: for example, *The Guardian* has a richer, fuller, and more explanatory set of entries related to the tradition and its adherents than *The Daily Telegraph*, and this matches assessments of how these news organisations treat Muslims and Islam. From this, I comment on the adequacy of these style guides for such an important news topic in the 21st Century and problematise the utility of style guides in general as a resource for uncertain journalists.

## Keywords

Muslims – journalism – UK – style guides – news language – representation

Journalistic interest in Muslims and Islam is high. Since the start of this century, the proportion of news space dedicated to the religion and its followers has increased dramatically and stayed high, spurred by the attacks of September 11, 2001 and sustained by concerns about terrorism, extremism, and migration (Baker et al., 2013; Bleich and van der Veen, 2022; Poole, 2002). Unfortunately, journalistic understanding of Muslims and Islam has not matched this trajectory. The lack of knowledge about the tradition, coupled with the frequent adoption of frames casting Muslims as an incommensurable Other or, worse, a malign and destructive force, are revealed in analyses of news content. Studies use words such as “misrepresentation” and “racism” in characterising their subject (Meer and Modood, 2009; Richardson, 2004). Scholarship shows unsatisfactory coverage of religion in general (Cohen, 2018; Marshall et al., 2009), prompting calls for improved religious literacy (All Party Parliamentary Group on Religion in the Media, 2021; Littau, 2015). Nonetheless, Islam is an exceptional case. The news carries Islamophobic statements, and research demonstrates that Islamophobia is “negatively associated with mental health, indicators of physical health, and health care access” (Samari et al., 2018, p. e5), alongside the social harms of exclusion. This, combined with coverage out of proportion to its demographic share, indicates how high the stakes are for Muslims. Getting news coverage right is a social good.

Getting the information right depends on learning. One of the foundational values in Western journalism is accuracy. “Research” as journalists apply it is not the same rigorous process as it is for academics, lacking the time, the access, and the training to read peer reviewed research or wade through data sets. Ivor Shapiro and colleagues call verification a “strategic ritual” (2013). Journalists may talk with colleagues who have previously covered the subject or call sources for background interviews. Reading remains important, but more often they read previous articles and primary documents.

They may also read style guides, the resource I examine in this article. Style guides are a “neglected aspect” of news production (Cameron, 1996). Rarely mentioned in literature on news construction, their overt teleological value is precisely in educating journalists on newsworthy subjects with strong potential for error. The weight of critical scholarship suggests Muslims and Islam comprise such a subject.

This presupposes that style guides are consulted regularly by journalists, which is not obvious, either from the scant literature or from my ethnographic research among journalists, coupled with my prior professional experience. I report key findings from a project assessing current style guides available to UK journalists for the terms and concepts discussed, the message they provide, and how this guidance corresponds with current understandings of the religious tradition. Positively, the breadth of entries suggests news organisations take

the subject seriously, but there are errors and absences that can be improved to guide journalists better.

### Style Guides as a Journalistic Tool

Style guides are rarely mentioned in literature on news production. The classic newsroom ethnographies (e.g. Gans, 1980; Schlesinger, 1987; Tuchman, 1978) do not mention these guides among the routinised elements of a newsworker's day. They do appear in publications on journalism education. As trainees are socialised into the norms of the profession, conformity to a standard style such as that used by the Associated Press (AP) is seen as a vital skill (e.g. Christ and Henderson, 2014; Littlefield, 2021). These studies are pedagogical, examining how style is taught rather than interrogating the content of guides.

Robert DiNicola (1994) suggests a bridge between education and practice. He claims that, in his dozen years in journalism, "Several times every day, any conscientious copy editor, whether a novice or a veteran, is likely to reach for the stylebook to check the proper way to render this or that." (DiNicola, 1994, p. 64) His article is labelled "commentary" rather than research, and his phrases offer fuzzy precision: "any conscientious copy editor" leaves room for deviants; "is likely to" implies regularity without evidence. Nonetheless, his piece suggests the importance of learning AP style as a trainee to conform to professional expectations.

When I trained for journalism in the late 1990s, I was introduced to *The Canadian Press Stylebook* (Tasko, 1999) and its slender sibling *CP Caps and Spelling* (The Canadian Press, 1998). Both guides were presented to students as the industry standard and were used to assess our writing. The Stylebook included tips for reporting and structure, and it described what CP judged to be good writing. *Caps and Spelling* was a small, coil bound, alphabetically ordered directory of words for which CP had a preferred style. Coursework that deviated from these conventions received a zero. After graduating, I worked for several years with the public broadcaster and brought my copies to work, though there were also copies at the editor's desk and in cabinets dotting the newsroom floor. Over the years, I consulted them less often as I absorbed their principles. After pivoting to academia, I interviewed journalists in Scotland about their knowledge of and relations with Muslims and Islam; only one mentioned consulting style guides, whilst another said they had received a guide pertaining to the subject but had not used it.

This corresponds with the findings of Allan Bell, one of the few journalism scholars to discuss style guides and their place in practice. Bell was both a

practicing editor and reporter and a sociolinguist. His practical experience informed *The Language of News Media* (Bell, 1991) which, though not a newsroom ethnography, recognises the impact of routines on news language. For Bell, interviews and previous news reports constitute the primary sources of information for journalists. He describes style guides as largely the domain of copy editors and says, contrary to DiNicola's assessment, they are seldom consulted (Bell, 1991, p. 82–83).

Deborah Cameron (1996) looked at style guides in sociolinguistic perspective – their form and purpose. With access to the *Times* guides from the 1913 original to its 1992 version, Cameron assessed the development of a large newspaper's house guide as both a reflection of contemporary context and a disciplinary tool revealing the biases and priorities of the organisation. Cameron notes two purposes for the style guide: general consistency of journalistic style and particular consistency of institutional voice. Accuracy is valued, and the guide promotes plain speech and simple phrases. Yet even as it upholds proper journalistic style, it insists on phrases and conventions that for historical and positional reasons indicate *Times* style, though they may stray from plain speech. Cameron highlights the guide's importance in news production: “the archived internal correspondence shows style rules have been assiduously policed ... and the rules' substance has been the subject of ongoing discussion – sometimes impassioned debate – among editorial staff.” (1996, p. 318)

Media scholar Fred Vultee (2012) similarly evaluates the *AP Stylebook*, focusing on reporting about the Middle East and, by extension, Islam. As AP reports more on Islam, and over a greater diversity of stories, its guidance in the *Stylebook* becomes more granular and nuanced – “not a completely de-Orientalized East, but ... manifestly a less Orientalized one.” (2012, p. 461) Neither Vultee nor Cameron investigate the extent to which journalists use these documents, save that they have conditioned reporting for the *Times* or AP. Vultee identifies the wider social value of understanding the changes in the definition or explanation of key terms: “AP's decisions about whether ‘sharia’ is defined as ‘Islamic law’ or ‘strict Islamic law’ ... are in effect national decisions.” (2012, p. 452) As the wireservice is used nationally – indeed, internationally – Vultee's analysis is not overstated. Their decisions on style at least inform the decisions of smaller organisations, and subscribing organisations may merely import a wire service's style decisions, however progressive or prejudiced.

Updating a style guide indicates the importance of a word or topic in that national conversation. For Cameron, new editions form “an important gatekeeping function, moving the form thus adopted from the margin to the mainstream, and conversely ensuring that other forms which are not adopted remain marginal.” (Cameron, 1995, p. 56–57) Print guides balanced the need

for currency against the expense of reprinting, thus creating a lag between the need for correction and the material change. Moving style guides online allows them to be more responsive. Interventions into events in the daily news cycle illustrate the benefits and risks: on 30 September 2020, the *AP Stylebook* used its Twitter account to interpret guidance on the word “riot” and synonyms during mass demonstrations in support of Black Lives Matter and the murder of George Floyd, making news in its own right (New York Post, 2020). Similarly, AP’s vice president for standards wrote a blog addressing questions about language when rioters took over the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 (Daniszewski, 2021). The advice journalists receive from these tools shapes the language of news reports, conditioning the national lexicon.

Language is a key factor in scholarly assessment of journalism on Muslims and Islam. Critical discourse analysis, established by such scholars as Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk, Roger Fowler, and Norman Fairclough, seeks to identify ideology and, therefore, social power within language. Though Fowler concentrates on the news, he broadens his subject to all spoken and written text: “language is not a clear window but a refracting, structuring medium.” (1991, p. 10) The language put in place through news media about Muslims and Islam repeats and establishes the structures in which they exist – what Stewart Hoover calls “the normative narratives of cultures.” (2018, p. 17) Several studies in this field since 9/11 have applied critical discourse analysis as a tool to interpret the words journalists use, their meaning, and the social implications of that language (Al-Azami, 2016; Baker et al., 2013; Baker and McEnergy, 2018; Richardson, 2004). It is therefore important to examine all the sources that shape the language which itself shapes society.

### Studying Style Guides

Professional obligation to accuracy and recognition of their social role mean that for journalists, getting language right is a necessary part of news work. Style guides are one tool for accomplishing this. Given the high intensity of reporting *on* Muslims in UK journalism and the high stakes *for* Muslims of their social representation, an examination of style guides for their content relative to Muslims and Islam is essential.

In June to August 2019, I led a survey of news style guides to evaluate what they say about Muslims and Islam, supported by an undergraduate research assistant. We contacted 19 UK newsrooms covering a range of formats, requesting their house style guides. We received only four positive responses

with links or attachments.<sup>1</sup> Five news organisations offered negative replies – either that they did not have such a guide or that it was private; the remainder did not respond. We also included the style guide for UK news wire service Reuters.<sup>2</sup> Its inclusion is significant, because as a wire service, its copy is incorporated into the pages of its subscribing organisations – sometimes even printed word for word without changes. Its style decisions become, in effect, house style decisions for thousands of other news organisations not only in the UK but globally.

We enriched our sample with guides developed by civil society groups: the Society of Editors' guide *Reporting Diversity* (Elliott, 2005), the online Religion Stylebook<sup>3</sup> – prepared and maintained as a free service by the Religion News Association in the US – and journalist-oriented guides from the British Council (Masood, 2006) and MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development, 2018).

Some of the news organisations offering negative replies mentioned organisations they consult, including the Muslim Council of Britain, TellMAMA, and the Independent Press Standards Organisation. At the time of the study, none of these organisations had public resources presented as a style guide for journalists and so are not included. Finally, based on replies from some newsrooms, we consulted the Oxford English Dictionary's online service. In total, we evaluated a sample of ten style guides.

The political orientation of these institutions is relevant, as news organisations on the political right publish more suspicious, Islamophobic reporting – *The Daily Telegraph* not least among these (Baker et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2008; Richardson, 2004). The left-leaning *Guardian's* attitude to Muslims used to be equally but differently challenging (Poole, 2002), but the newspaper has confronted this legacy since 9/11, and scholars have since found that the broadsheet avoids many of the problematic excesses in language and framing offered by other newspapers (Baker et al., 2013; Baker and McEnery, 2018). BuzzFeed, as a recent online startup, has had less time to receive a scholarly appraisal of its political orientation, but studies of its election coverage suggest progressive politics in terms of issues (which may indicate more sympathetic coverage of British Muslims as a marginalised population) but a generally

1 BBC – <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsstyleguide/a/>; *The Guardian* – <https://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-a/>; *The Daily Telegraph* – <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/style-book/>; BuzzFeed <https://www.buzzfeed.com/emmyf/buzzfeed-style-guide>.

2 In 2019, Reuters offered the Handbook of Journalism as a freely accessible clickable resource. Since then, the guide has disappeared from public view, though an archived version can be found via the Wayback Machine – [https://web.archive.org/web/20200521004339/http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=The\\_Reuters\\_Style\\_Guide](https://web.archive.org/web/20200521004339/http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=The_Reuters_Style_Guide).

3 <https://religionstylebook.com/>.

non-partisan approach to parties and the political spectrum (Dennis and Sampaio-Dias, 2021; Thomas and Cushion, 2019). BBC is ostensibly bound to political impartiality due to the governance of the Broadcast Code, though scholars and critics from all perspectives have questioned its neutrality (for discussion, see Mills, 2016). Like the BBC, Reuters is officially committed to impartiality (Thomson Reuters, n.d.), and US scholars Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling (2008) found the service adhered to this principle in contrast with partisan online news sites.

The orientation of the civil society groups issuing style guides should also be examined. None are partisan political organisations, though the British Council receives funding from the UK government through a grant and is run by a Royal Charter. Its remit concerns cultural exchange, which may explain the creation of a guide dedicated to a culturally defined population. MEND is unabashedly political, advocating for the interests of British Muslims and critical of state policies such as Prevent as well as injurious media coverage, all of which is reflected in its media guide. The Society of Editors is funded by members within the journalism industry, and its purpose is largely focused on supporting that industry; its diversity guide can be read in the context of sharing best practice among senior newswriters. The Religion News Association, one arm of the Religion News Foundation, a US non-profit organisation with interfaith and ecumenical roots. It does not profess political or doctrinal affiliation and is based at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. Its goals with the stylebook, as with the Society of Editors, is primarily to support journalists in their work and, in this case, to raise the prominence of religion as a subject in news.

We do not consider these guides equally in terms of their accessibility to or value for working journalists. House style guides from UK news organisations were given priority: if a term did not appear in one of those five documents, it was not included in the set of keywords. The guides from MEND, the British Council, and the Society of Editors were more discursive reports than an encyclopaedic compendium, though the British Council's guide also contained an alphabetical glossary at the back from which several definitions were gleaned. For these discursive sources, we read them for guidance pertaining to any keywords on our list. If a term or its entry had a primarily political dimension or was rooted in Arabic rather than Islamic culture, we did not include it. *Mecca* therefore is included because of its significance to Islam but not *The Guardian's* entry "Iraqi placenames"; *mujahideen* and *fedayeen* are included as general categories but not "the Taliban", which in the guides

refers to a specific political group. From this sample, we identified 42 keywords related to Islam and Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

### The Contents of Style Guides

The sample of style guides tells a varying tale. Guides contained upwards of 29 keywords or 12 and under. No guide contained all 42 terms – not even the Oxford dictionary, which defined 34 of the 42 keywords. Among the priority set, *The Guardian's* was the most complete with 33 keywords; the BBC and Reuters each had 29. BuzzFeed's guide – an alphabetic but ad hoc document – had the fewest, with only six of 42 keywords represented, and *The Daily Telegraph* included 11. Of the discursive guides, MEND covered ten terms, Society of Editors 11, and the British Council 12. Meanwhile, Religion Stylebook defined 30 of 42 keywords.

Frequency of the keywords does not necessarily indicate their importance. Four terms on *The Guardian's* list – *eid mubarak*, *inshallah*, *Lailat al-Miraj* and *Lailat al-Qadr* – appears in no other guide. *Burkini* and *mufti* are defined only twice, including the dictionary. *Muslim dress* also features only twice, but Reuters gives a lengthy explanatory note for it. This entry includes keywords from our list (*burqa*, *hijab*, and *niqab*), along with “chador” and “abaya”. Reuters first declares that all “Islamic head coverings” are a form of hijab, “a term that encompasses garments ranging from headscarves that simply cover the hair to cloaks that cover the entire head, face and body.” Brief descriptions follow for different kinds of hijab, which are sometimes ascribed to a particular region or sect. The Society of Editors' guide broadens the scope of *Muslim dress* by gender, noting that “Muslim men and women are required by the Qur'an to dress modestly.” (Elliott, 2005, p. 43)

*Muslim*, *Qur'an*, *shari'ah*, and *Shi'a* are the most popular terms, appearing in eight of ten guides. Half of the entries for *Muslim* are simply spelling preferences, distinguishing “Muslim” from “Moslem”. This belies decisions as much sociological as orthographic. As Baker and colleagues (2013, p. 77–78) note, the switch from “Moslem” to “Muslim” in UK newspapers followed a campaign from the Muslim Council of Britain, with two newspapers – *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mail* – conspicuous in their use of the word into

4 Our list of keywords: *al-Aqsa Mosque*, *Allah*, *Allahu Akbar*, *burkini*, *burqa*, *Eid al-Adha*, *Eid al-Fitr*, *eid mubarak*, *fatwa*, *fedayeen*, *hajj*, *halal*, *hijab*, *imam*, *inshallah*, *Islam*, *Islamic*, *Islamist*, *Islamophobia*, *jihad*, *jihadi*, *jihadist*, *Ka'bah*, *kafir*, *Lailat al-Miraj*, *Lailat al-Qadr*, *madrassa*, *Mecca*, *mufti*, *Muhammad*, *mujahideen*, *mullah*, *Muslim*, *Muslim dress*, *niqab*, *Qur'an*, *Ramadan*, *shari'ah*, *sheikh*, *Shi'a*, *Sunni*, and *Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif*.



the early 2000s; the former dropped “Moslem” shortly after the MCB wrote with an explicit request in 2002, but the latter tabloid retained its usage until 2004. This background is not discussed in the style guides. Only the Society of Editors explains some of the rationale: “People refer to themselves as Muslims. Many regard Moslem as a term of abuse, like people of African descent dislike being called negroes.” (Elliott, 2005, p. 19)

Though many entries concern spelling preference, this preference sometimes changes from guide to guide. *The Guardian*, for example, uses *burqa* “not burka”, whilst for the BBC, “Burka is our favoured spelling”; Reuters’s entry offers both alongside “hijab” and “chador”. Four guides explicitly favour “Qur’an” whilst two guides favour “Koran”. The dissenting guides are alert to the inconsistency: the BBC refers to “Koran” as “our spelling of the Islamic sacred book”, and Reuters notes in parentheses that “AP uses Quran”. This may indicate an obstinate holdover from a previous colonial paradigm, as with “Muslim/Moslem”. The Society of Editors’ guide, however, suggests less intensity in the matter: “There is nothing offensive in the anglicised Koran, but it is disliked by some Muslims.” (Elliott, 2005, p. 18) Among the priority set, all guides agree that “prophet” takes a capital when combined with *Muhammad*. Three favour “Muhammad” for spelling, with *The Guardian* and the BBC justifying the choice from Arab contexts and transliteration. Left-leaning broadsheet *The Guardian* further includes the curious note that “The spelling Mohammed ... is considered archaic by most British Muslims today.” They do not provide a source for this judgement, but “Mohammed” happens to be the spelling favoured by right-leaning broadsheet *The Daily Telegraph*.

Discrepancies in spelling should not be surprising. The guides are, after all, codifying a house style that makes institutions distinct. Moreover, these words are drawn from Arabic language and script, so we might expect differences in transliteration. Some inconsistencies, however, spill from spelling to meaning. Concerning *shari’ah*, *The Guardian*’s simple definition “sharia law” is contradicted by the BBC and *The Daily Telegraph*, which calls the phrase a tautology, and BuzzFeed, which describes it as “unnecessary/redundant”. These guides, along with Reuters, Religion Stylebook, and the dictionary, define it as “Islamic law” or, more commonly, “Islamic religious law”. Religion Stylebook describes it as “revealed, canonical laws” and the British Council provides this entry:

For Muslims it represents the eternal, ethical and moral code of Islam based on the Qur’an and Sunnah. It includes all the religious, liturgical, ethical and legal systems which, taken together, regulate the lives of practising Muslims. It is a great deal more than the family and criminal codes

that are often intended by non-Muslim commentators using the name. Contrary to popular opinion, shari'ah is organic and evolving, and contingent to local contexts. (Masood, 2006, p. 66)

Here, we see guides in conversation with each other as they explain a more commonly reported topic – shari'ah's place in British legal framework – aiming at least to keep journalists from error. In some cases, they are further educating them and perhaps encouraging them to consult appropriate sources.

### Clearing Up Confusion?

The purpose of educating notionally secular journalists who may be unfamiliar with Islam and correcting errors that have intruded in news reports is shown in the explanatory notes for entries. Titles, for example, are a general theme running through style guides – not only how to spell them but when to use them. Entries for *sheikh* illustrate this, with Religion Stylebook framing its entry in Christian-normative terms: “Most Islamic clergymen use the title sheikh like a Christian cleric uses the Rev.” The term “clergy” also often characterises *mullah* and *imam*, though some entries make a point of distinguishing Islamic structures from Christian ones, such as *The Daily Telegraph's* entry for *imam*: “Islam does not have a priesthood, so refer to clerics not priests. ‘Clergy’ is acceptable.” Entries for *madrasa* refer to education, though the entries are too brief to stand alone as support for the uncertain journalist.

Entries for specific festivals are often sufficiently explanatory, such as *Eid al-Adha*, *Eid al-Fitr*, *hajj* and *Ramadan*. *The Guardian's* entries for *Lailat al-Miraj* and *Lailat al-Qadr* are too brief to be of any use as a standalone definition (“Islamic holy day” and “Islamic holy day, time for study and prayer” respectively), yet equally one wonders whether these are terms a journalist is likely to include in a news story. Conversely, it seems helpful to include everyday expressions such as *inshallah*, which may come up in an interview. Style guide editors should consider other expressions such as “alhamdulillah” and “masha'Allah” that Muslims might say reflexively. A reflexive word with much more negative valence, *kafir*, is mentioned in three guides, defined as an unbeliever. *The Guardian* and the Oxford dictionary go further, emphasising that it is derogatory or offensive; lacking this warning, the BBC's guide risks journalists quoting sources without knowing the inflammatory nature of the term. Addressing another common confusion, Reuters limits its entry for *Allah* to “The Arabic name for God in Islam”, whereas *The Guardian*, Religion

Stylebook, and the dictionary widen it to encompass not only Muslims but Arabic speakers generally.

Entries for the sectarian division of *Sunni* and *Shi'a* cover history, sociology, and even geography alongside orthography. Entries for *The Daily Telegraph* and BuzzFeed are limited to spelling conventions, pluralisation, and distinctions between noun and adjectival form; *The Guardian's* entry is similar but refers to "two branches of Islam". Reuters and Religion Stylebook expand on this, including rough percentages to illustrate their majority and minority status demographically. Five guides provide explanatory notes for the nature of the split. Religion Stylebook and the Oxford dictionary refer to the death of Muhammad and the succession of his son-in-law Ali. Reuters also mentions the importance for Shi'a Islam of the Prophet's family line, which then leads to the doctrinal expectation of the return of the "Hidden Imam". However, Reuters emphasises the split more on contemporary organisational grounds:

As well as adhering to the Muslim holy book, the Koran, they follow the Prophet Mohammad's rule of life (the Sunna) and traditions based on his sayings. Shias, also known as Shi'ites, give weight mostly to the Koran and the interpretations of their theologians.

The BBC's entry is even more sociological, including reference to titles of religious authorities:

Shia Muslims do have a clergy, whose members are known generically as mullahs. The highest Shia religious authority is an ayatollah.

The Sunnis have no institutional clergy, although each mosque has an imam ... who teaches, leads prayers etc. The highest religious authority in a Sunni Muslim country is the mufti, who issues fatwas, or religious edicts.

Finally, the British Council's guide identifies *Shi'a* as "a school of thought within Islam" and also highlights Iran and southern Iraq as areas of predominance (Masood, 2006, p. 66).

Some of the explanatory notes in the style guides presuppose errors that journalists have previously made. Three of the seven entries for *fatwa* explain that it is "not" or "not necessarily" a death sentence, tacitly referencing the legacy of the Rushdie Affair on journalistic understandings of Islam, Muslims, and specifically the term *fatwa* (Vultee, 2006). Unhelpfully, the Oxford dictionary does define it thus, after correctly defining *fatwa* as a legal ruling or scholarly opinion. Prefaced as "irregular", the dictionary offers the second definition, "A

declaration or decree by a Muslim authority calling for a person to be put to death, typically as a punishment for blasphemy or apostasy; a death sentence.”

This has strong potential for confusion, but we must consider the dictionary as a descriptive account of language as it is used, over and against the prescriptive authority by which it is invoked (Cameron, 1995). The tendency to reify “a death sentence” in Western uses, not least in the news media, has made it a definition the dictionary must include for explanatory purposes, even as this perpetuates what Muslims and scholars of religion call an error. This highlights the danger for news organisations that uncritically rely on the dictionary as an accurate source to verify meaning.

The phrase *Allahu Akbar* could do with more of the corrective aspects seen with *fatwa*: *The Guardian* merely writes, “God is greatest”, whereas the BBC and Reuters emphasise that it is “God is greatest”, *not* “God is great”. Religion Stylebook and the Oxford dictionary suggest both are acceptable. Scholarship suggests more is going on with the phrase, however: the Centre for Media Monitoring spotlights journalistic use, especially in headlines: “The constant reference to ‘Allahu Akbar’ in the context of terrorism has ... conflated the phrase with acts of violence and has lent an ordinary Islamic phrase a negative connotation.” (Centre for Media Monitoring, 2020, p. 100) As the phrase becomes a dog whistle for Islamophobic interests, the inclusion of contextual notes for this entry would be helpful.

### Courting Controversy?

Whilst *Allahu Akbar* has been inflected with controversial subtext, other keywords engage directly with misunderstandings that have significant consequences for Muslims. Their treatment affects how well news organisations are able to manage critiques from scholars and activists that they not only misrepresent but negatively represent Muslims. On a positive note, though scholarship has highlighted the predominance of terrorism as a theme in UK reporting on Muslims (Baker et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2008), none of the style guides referred to Islam or Muslims in their entries on “terrorism”. All those that defined it urged caution in using the term.

*Jihad* and its cognates *jihadi* and *jihadist* are treated in three of the five priority guides and the dictionary; Religion Stylebook, the British Council, and the Society of Editors include *jihad*. Aside from the Oxford dictionary, all entries define the term in the context of struggle. Most guides indicate at least two meanings for *jihad*, with the British Council and Society of Editors employing the qualifying phrases “Greater Jihad” and “Lesser Jihad”. These

definitions emphasise the “moral, inner struggle” (Masood, 2006, p. 66) as the more common understanding. Battle, restricted to defensive conditions, is also mentioned, though the Society of Editors extends “Lesser Jihad” to missionary activities as well. Religion Stylebook’s entry refers to “militant Muslims” who employ the term to justify attacks against non-Muslims and other Muslim sects— “all acts condemned by mainstream Islam”, though no source is given for this. Alert to the critical context, Religion Stylebook closes by noting that “Although many in the media translate jihad as ‘holy war,’ it does not mean that literally”.

Nonetheless, this is precisely how two of the three house style guides define it. For the BBC, it is an “Arabic word meaning holy war or struggle” and, for Reuters, “An Islamic holy war or struggle.” Both entries leave room for other meanings: the BBC reminds users that “It does not always entail violence and we should be clear in instances where it does”, whilst Reuters adds a warning: “Use with extreme care.” *The Guardian*’s entry is the most complex of the three and has implications for the cognate terms:

Used by Muslims to describe three different kinds of struggle: an individual’s internal struggle to live out the Muslim faith as well as possible; the struggle to build a good Muslim society; and the struggle to defend Islam, with force if necessary.

Subsequently, the guide instructs *Guardian* journalists to apply the term *jihadi* to Muslims engaged in the first two iterations; *jihadist* is reserved for the third. The *jihadist* entry constructs a definition of jihadism, drawing in yet another adjective controversially applied to Muslims and Islam: “the fundamentalist pursuit of violent jihads to defend the Islamic faith.”

Reuters uses the terms *jihadi* and *jihadist* interchangeably to define those “who employ extreme violence to further their stated aims”. The wire service defends this: the words “are not ‘terms of abuse’ but expressions that have specific meaning and are widely used in specialist academic literature and counterinsurgency circles.” The BBC again urges clarity in the context of their usage, noting that the association of these cognates with violence “may offend Muslims who associate them with spiritual jihad.”

Most idiosyncratic is the set of entries for the Oxford dictionary. *Jihad* is defined as follows:

1. Islam. A religious war of Muslims against unbelievers, inculcated as a duty by the Qur’an and traditions.
2. In extended use. A war or crusade for or against some doctrine, opinion, or principle; war to the death.

This reduces the term to its most inflammatory and renders the concept orthodox in Islam. It ignores the term's active use by Muslims and historically rooted alternative meanings, and the violence implicit in its extended use (including "crusade", which was frequently perpetrated *against* Muslims) does nothing to rehabilitate the tradition for the uninformed. The cognates *jihadi* and *jihadist* are defined briefly in relation to this primary definition.

Though Reuters does not distinguish between *jihadi* and *jihadist* as *The Guardian* does, its definition does distinguish the two from *Islamist*, another of our keywords. This is not always clear: the entry for *jihadi/jihadist* begins by saying "Jihadists are Islamists" and later draws "A number of Islamist groups" into the term's orbit. However, the entry also states, "By contrast 'Islamists' are adherents of political Islam, i.e., they believe Islam should guide social, political and personal action but do not necessarily advocate violence." This matches Reuters's separate entry for *Islamist*, "A person or organisation advocating a political ideology based on Islam." All six definitions in the sample refer to a political movement that incorporates Islamic values or principles. The BBC recommends restricting its use to that of an adjective. *The Guardian* and Religion Stylebook both include indicative examples, from al-Qaida to Turkey's Justice and Development Party, demonstrating the breadth of groups the term can encompass. The Oxford dictionary entry for *Islamist* is not as chillingly narrow as for *jihad*, but it employs a term many scholars of Islam will find difficult. The dictionary declares an *Islamist* to be "an Islamic fundamentalist", a noun rejected by scholars as disparate as Bernard Lewis and Edward Said (see Kramer, 2003).

The final term discussed here is one that most style guides fail to address. Given the importance of Islamophobia for Muslims in Britain since the report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 1997), we expected style guides for journalists to lay clear boundaries for the term. Reports on the phenomenon identify news media as a vessel for Islamophobic sentiments, if not an originator of them. Moreover, Islamophobia contours the lived experience of so many Muslims living in Britain that it will be a dimension of news stories journalists investigate. Yet only seven guides include the term and most only briefly. Among the priority sample, Reuters ignores it, whilst *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* simply include the term in their alphabetic lists, indicating how it is meant to be spelled without venturing a definition. BuzzFeed does not have an entry for *Islamophobia*, but within the entry for "protest", it notes "anti-Muslim, preferred to anti-Islam or Islamophobic". The BBC includes the confusing explanatory note, "Can be wrongly used to mean hatred of Muslims rather than fear – we should be clear hat we are referring to." This is not clear, as most discussions of

Islamophobia locate its meaning in hatred rather than fear of Muslims, which even the Oxford dictionary's definition notes, so the BBC is being at best naïve or ill-informed here.

It is the discursive guides that expand on the term. MEND, a civil society group dedicated to defending Muslims against Islamophobia, defines it as "a baseless hostility and fear vis-à-vis Islam [and], as a result, a fear of and aversion towards all Muslims or the majority of them." (2018, p. 40) Journalists, committed to a professional appearance of independence and objectivity, may question the adjective "baseless", rendering MEND's definition difficult to accept. The British Council's definition, nested in a page-length discussion of *Islamophobia*, gives the most depth:

a single word that describes the fear, hatred, or prejudice that some people hold about Islam and Muslims. There is no agreed definition, but examples of what many Muslims and non-Muslims regard as Islamophobic behaviour include systematic discrimination against a person because he or she is Muslim; physical assault or attack motivated by a hatred of Muslims; and speech or writing that is intended to cause harassment, lead to racial or religious tensions, or public order disturbances. (Masood, 2006, p. 23)

This acknowledges a wider problem with *Islamophobia* that may explain why news organisations are reluctant to define the word. A quarter-century of debates, commissions, and studies has not provided a definition all parties agree on. Journalists may feel implicated in this process and dismiss the term as a liberal invention (Meer and Modood, 2009). In 2018, the All Party Parliamentary Group for British Muslims produced a report that included the definition, "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness." (2018, p. 56) Though adopted by many political parties and other institutions, the governing Conservative Party has not adopted it. With the wider social definition still in question, news organisations may be unwilling to commit to their instruction on its usage. The result is that journalists lack clear guidance on a term common in news reports and central to the experience of Muslims in Britain.

### What It Means for Journalism

The evaluation of style guides for their content concerning Muslims and Islam shows a mixed picture. Several news organisations offer specific guidance

on these keywords, indicating their awareness of the importance of the subject and their commitment to the news value of accuracy. Not all entries, however, are as accurate as they could be. The consequences of this vary: though it might be irritating for a Muslim to read a bland reference to *Lailat al-Qadr* as an “Islamic holy day”, it can be much graver to see *jihad* depicted as an “Islamic holy war” in an article about someone’s motivations to set up a charity. This presumes that the explanations in style guides transfer directly to the published copy. In truth, the primary audience is the journalist in a secularised work environment, and when confronted with an unfamiliar term, this journalist may consult the guide for support. How the guide characterises *jihad* – a word sitting in their interview transcript – may determine whether the journalist nods their head and gets on with it, scratches their head and seeks more information, prints an error, or removes a line of inquiry entirely from the story. Vultee tells how a poor understanding of *jihad* in 1994 led to “a forced correction” in copy from the Associated Press on statements between PLO leader Yassir Arafat and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin (2012, p. 457). The potential to derail a peace process indicates how high the stakes can be, and Vultee identifies this as “the sort of event the stylebook’s role as definer is intended to mitigate.” (2012, p. 457)

Supplementary style guides tended to provide fuller, more nuanced guidance that explained the concepts in question and the negative consequences of inaccurate reporting. In the case of MEND, however, this guidance may be ignored due to journalistic mistrust in the organisation. Moreover, these guides are often written discursively rather than as an alphabetic resource; they are not as useful for the journalist preparing copy on a deadline. With the house style guides, we see tensions between a broad goal of accuracy and a limited goal of institutional branding. *The Guardian* and, to a lesser extent, the BBC and Reuters had a wider range of terms included, and their entries were often helpful and informed.

News organisations are aware of their competitors, and the imprecision of transliterating terms from Arabic script gives them room to flex their independence. At the same time, this works against a commitment to consistency: if Westminster is Westminster is Westminster, why is the Qur’an the Quran and the Koran? Does this inconsistency continue to present Islam as the Other for journalists?

Orthographic inconsistencies may be understood in terms of tradition, but style guides should not allow journalists to persist in error. *The Guardian* does its journalism a disservice by including “sharia law” as acceptable phrasing. Not only is the shorthand tautological, but its lack of accompanying explanation provides no clue to journalists that this is an important matter



with potential for confusion. Similarly, the BBC and Reuters' entries on *jihad* could be developed with more nuance, given the term's frequent association with violence and terrorist activity. Many of the explanatory notes discussed above are insufficient on their own, but they provide enough warning and information for journalists to probe deeper before writing their copy. Given that the style guides in the priority set are intended for a general journalistic audience rather than a specialised one, such as Religion Stylebook, this is as much as we can legitimately ask of them.

Beyond getting it wrong, there is the problem of not getting it at all. The majority of news organisations we contacted had no house style guide, or at least none they were willing to share. Their journalists subsequently lack guidance, and as we saw with *jihad* and *fatwa*, relying on the Oxford dictionary may not bring good results. Some of the style guides we did see were incomplete. BuzzFeed covered only six of our 42 keywords, and *The Daily Telegraph* managed not quite double that; moreover, half of its entries were limited to preferred spellings, thereby providing little guidance for its journalists. Scholars have noted tendencies in *The Daily Telegraph* – one of the 'quality' newspapers – that resemble tabloid themes and strategies when reporting on Muslims and Islam (Baker et al., 2013, p. 82–83; Poole, 2012, p. 182). More thorough guidance would help improve the quality and accuracy of its representations.

Understanding what is *in* style guides matters little without understanding how they are used. We cannot test DiNicola's claim that conscientious journalists reach for the stylebook several times a day without witnessing the practice through observational study. Moreover, familiarity with Islam and Muslims will help journalists to know that certain terms or ideas need to be verified: Jaqui Ewart and colleagues (2017) found that training on the basics of Islam helped Australian journalists improve their knowledge and apply it to a variety of stories. With reliable information and explanatory notes that prompt further inquiry, style guides can provide ongoing support for trained journalists. Indeed, one of the strengths of some of the guides in our sample was their exhortation for journalists to exercise caution. To the extent these warnings are heeded, they can lead journalists to deeper knowledge about the topic and the consequences of their reporting.

Vultee's assessment of *AP Stylebook* sees Islam grow from a four-line definition in 1977 to a chunky entry "as long as those for 'Episcopal Church' and 'Anglican Communion' combined" in 2002 (2012, p. 450). Though my study lacks measurement over time, it shows a breadth of explanation for Islam and its related terminology across ten journalistic style guides in the post-9/11 period. It provides evidence of serious attention to the tradition as well

as a recognition of the high stakes involved in how terms are used – for the community being reported on; for the news institutions doing the reporting, which are notionally committed to accuracy and at least want to avoid making the news themselves for the wrong reasons; and for society as a whole, which relies on news reports and news language to provide accurate information to improve its understanding of unfamiliar topics.

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