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Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press

Paul Baker, Costas Gabrielatos and Tony McEnery

Cambridge and New York

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Innovations in scope and methodology make this book stand out. Eleven national daily newspapers and their Sunday equivalents are examined for the period 1998-2009. The authors use a set of search terms to retrieve every text that referred to Islam and Muslims, from Nexus UK. The corpus, comprising 200,037 newspaper articles (or 143 million words) underpins the most extensive research ever conducted on this topic. Another distinctive characteristic is the broadly successful attempt to reduce the inevitable researcher bias by ‘doing to others as you would have done to you’ (24). In a further effort to diminish bias, the authors adopt a computerised corpus-linguistics method (which is not content analysis): Sketch Engine is an advanced online corpus-analysis tool that identifies linguistic patterns and grammatical structures so as to reveal dominant or less visible discourses or representations of the world. Combining that with critical discourse analysis makes it possible to identify interdiscursivity and intertextuality and, furthermore, to consider the topic from multiple perspectives. The findings do not differ much from the conclusions of related studies – as the general media portrayal of Muslims is found to be negative – but the vast amount of data analysed here provides much greater credibility. The researchers go on to make cautious suggestions about how the current situation could be improved.

The goal of this book is to examine the ways in which the national newspapers represent Islam and Muslims, in terms of language use, variation over time, differences among newspapers, and controversial legitimisation practices. Media representations are seen to be constructed through language (choices) and the prioritisation of some events and opinions over others, constrained by space and time limitations. The authors argue that newspapers have well-established power to influence society and to set the agenda for some socially significant issues.

The distinctions between tabloid/broadsheet, left-leaning/right-leaning (anti-religious/pro-religious) and ‘hard news’/‘soft-news’ are discussed, and it is pointed out that tabloids, right-leaning newspapers and Sunday editions are more read than broadsheets, left-leaning papers and daily editions. The pro-religious or pro-Christian newspapers are right-leaning, while anti-religious or secularist newspapers lean the other way.

In Chapter 2, the researchers explore the whole corpus, identify particular semantic groups and the most salient patterns of representation, and conclude that Islam and Muslims were predominantly reported in the context of conflict. A striking finding is that ‘the term *terror** occurs more often than *Islam** in a corpus in which *Islam** was one of [the] search query terms’ (65). Furthermore, by comparing news from the Islam-UK corpus with that of the British National Corpus, the authors ascertain that reporting in the context of conflict was not a general trend in the UK press – the Islam-UK corpus contains a statistically significantly greater number of news stories about conflict.

Chapters 3 and 4 compare different parts of the corpus and reveal intriguing findings for each newspaper and each year. Chapter 3 examines differences between tabloids and broadsheets, provides details of their different readerships, and shows that British national newspapers adopt different stances, have diverse priorities, and focus on distinct news stories. The tabloids used the term *terror* more than twice as much as did the broadsheets. As well, they covered Muslims in the context of home events, whereas the broadsheets saw them through the prism of international events. The latter are also seen to make some attempts to distinguish between different branches of Islam. Chapter 4 reports that the gradual personalisation and domestication of the news discourse on Islam and Muslims constitute two major changes in the British press.

Chapters 5 to 8 provide more specific and detailed analyses of the common patterns established in the first three empirical chapters. Chapter 5 thus analyses terms that collectivise and differentiate among Muslims; it shows that the British press was apt to present a monolithic and homogenous picture of Islam and Muslims, which – as Muslims reside in a number of countries and societies characterised by even a larger number of languages, traditions and cultures – is an ‘unacceptable generalization of the most irresponsible sort’ (123: citing the

words of Edward Said). Muslims were collectively reported as hostile and having tense relations with the West, a view that contrasts sharply with the results of a Gallup survey revealing that Muslims ‘have shown remarkable tolerance in the face of misrepresentation’ (147). Chapter 6 considers strength of belief by looking at the three most frequent modifiers of ‘Muslim’ – namely ‘extremist,’ ‘moderate’ and ‘devout.’ Muslims and Islam are most often associated with extremism, and the usage of ‘moderate’ and ‘devout’ is found to be ambivalent.

Chapter 7 deals with the discourse on ‘Muslims on benefits.’ Reporting here was originally triggered by some tabloids that found a tiny number of notorious ‘hate preachers’ to be on benefits. Subsequently, any Muslim on benefits began receiving coverage. This was a component of a larger discourse, one criticising the Labour government’s policy on the welfare state. Finally, columnists and readers’ letters were employed to legitimate the publication of unequivocally negative constructions of Muslims. Overall, this discourse was yet another way of stereotyping Muslims. Chapter 8 examines representations of Islam and Muslims from the perspective of gender-related issues. Whereas Muslim women were mainly written about in terms of veil-wearing and their position in Islam, Muslim men were seen from a radicalisation perspective. Generally, Islam was portrayed as oppressive and radical.

Chapter 9 is distinct in that it looks at the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in historical perspective. It explores a corpus of articles about Muslims from a nineteenth-century collection of British newspapers. Compared to contemporary representations, the overall picture is very similar: the earlier British press also reported Islam and Muslims in terms of conflict, violence and extremism. And, in Chapter 10, the main findings are recapped in relation to the social and political context. Although negativity dominated prior to the events of 9/11 and 7/7, they have led to increased coverage and to further negativisation.

The authors indicate that the Islamophobic representations circulated by the British press probably have two direct beneficiaries: newspaper editors who consolidate their readership, and Muslim extremists. Although British nationalist groups are discussed, they are not explicitly specified as a potential exploiter of Islamophobic constructions in the media. Moreover, it is implied that the British press is not solely responsible for negative representations, nor should Muslims themselves be exempted from legitimate criticism. The authors also identify some

‘good practices,’ encourage their further development, and make recommendations intended to promote more ‘balanced’ coverage. These include extending the range of contexts in which Muslims are portrayed – to consider, for instance, areas such as culture, art, architecture, poetry, music, film, fiction, education, business and travel – and in highlighting Islam in countries that are not involved in war and other conflicts. They also recommend allocating space to human-interest stories (e.g. coverage of Muslim men and women who make valuable contributions to British society – whether or not the latter wear veils).

In conclusion, this book has unique features, and it may well become a benchmark work for those wishing to analyse social representations from the perspectives of corpus linguistics, social science, discourse analysis, journalism and media studies. The work is also highly relevant to politics, governance, and Islamic studies. Last but not least, it would be of great value to journalists, policy-makers and non-expert consumers of research.

REVIEWER

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