

# Race and Reform

## Islam and Muslims in the British Media

A Submission to the Leveson Inquiry:  
The Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press

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London, England

July 2012

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## **About Unitas Communications Ltd.**

Unitas Communications is a specialist international affairs and strategic communications agency operating in the interface between businesses, NGOs, media and political institutions in the Islamic and Western worlds. Operating from London, Doha, Jeddah, Islamabad and Washington DC, Unitas' mission is to strengthen Islamic world relations with Western societies, governments, and civil society groups, through political advocacy, media engagement and strategic networking.

Unitas has a proven track record of delivering integrated strategies that bridge the communications gap between cultures and communities on a local and international scale. Unitas clients have included the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, the League of Arab States, the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, the National Health Service (NHS), HRH Prince of Wales Mosaic Mentorship Programme, the World Halal Forum Europe, Barclays Wealth, Fortune Group UAE, and Edmond de Rothschild Foundations, among others. Unitas is currently the official secretariat to the John Adams Society (the alumni association for US State Department Exchange Programs for England & Wales) and the All Parties Parliamentary Group on the Arab League.

Unitas also leads several non-profit initiatives including the Hikmah Club, an exclusive bi-monthly dining club bringing together thought leaders and professionals from the fields of politics, media, business, academia and civil society to discuss UK and international current affairs, and The Concordia Forum, an annual retreat dedicated to promoting greater social integration across the Western world by developing and strengthening a cross-Atlantic and pan-European network of leaders.

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Ahmed has taught at the University of Sussex's School of Global Studies and Brunel University's Politics & History Unit. He is also a regular media commentator and has appeared on BBC News 24, BBC World Today, BBC World News with George Alagiah, BBC Radio Five Live, BBC Asian Network, Channel 4, Sky News, C-SPAN Book TV, CNN, FOX News with Sean Hannity, Bloomberg, PBS Foreign Exchange with Fareed Zakaria, Al-Jazeera English, Press TV, Islam Channel, US National Public Radio, the US Progressive Radio Network, and so on. He is also cited and reviewed in the New York Times (Thomas Friedman), Sunday Times (Bryan Appleyard), Times Higher Educational Supplement, The Guardian (Steven Poole), The Independent (Yasmin Alibhai Brown), The Observer (Gore Vidal), Big Issue Magazine, and Vanity Fair (Christopher Hitchens), among other publications.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my colleagues at Unitas Communications (UC), Muddassar Ahmed, Shiraz Ahmad and Zahed Amanullah for their enthusiasm and dedication in commissioning and supporting this project. In particular, I would like to thank UC's Aliya Abidi for her outstanding commitment and extensive research assistance throughout this project, without whom it could not have been completed.

Special thanks are due, in no particular order, to Naeem Daar, Anita Nayyar, Nabila Pathan, Malik Abdeh, Tahir Wahid, Nash Jaffer, Arif Zaman, and Aatif Khan. Additionally, I must express my thanks to my wife, Akeela, for supporting me while I burned the midnight (and midday weekend!) oil.

Finally, I would like to extend utmost gratitude to our consultants for this project, for taking the time to lend us their unique knowledge and expertise: Lord Nazir Ahmed, Jason Beattie, Charlie Beckett, Lord Guy Black, Julian Bond, Brian Cathcart, Tehmina Kazi, Rita Payne, Richard Peppiatt, Julian Petley, Daanish Masood, Yasir Mirza, Rachel Saunders, Stephen Sashoua, Rt. Hon. Stephen Timms, and Burhan Wazir. Although their feedback has been cited throughout, needless to say, none of our consultants are responsible for the arguments and findings of this report, which are mine alone.

## **Introduction**

This report offers a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of inaccurate and racist anti-Muslim narratives within the British media. The report draws principally on two kinds of sources: firstly, it examines a large range of existing academic studies, policy reports, empirical analysis, opinion polls, and surveys to determine the state of the research on the question of 'Islamophobia' in the UK mainstream media and its societal impact; secondly, it utilises input obtained from 16 key experts – journalists and editors (from both broadcasting and print), media scholars, community leaders, and politicians – who were consulted to seek their informed perspectives on the scale of the problem, and what conceivably must be done to solve it.

This dual approach is pursued because it is important, on the one hand, rather than opening new avenues of inquiry, to establish exactly what is now indisputably proven by existing research, and on the other to operationalise this research in the context of the views of practitioners from a variety of backgrounds which are of direct relevance to this issue.

The report begins by contextualising the question of Islamophobia in the wider context of issues around racism, racist media narratives and their role in undermining community cohesion. Anti-Muslim discourses can thus be situated as a cultural subset of wider racism, shifting the focus of racist discourse from biology, physiology and ethnicity, to religious and cultural markers of difference which, nevertheless, remain equally pernicious as the former if not still entwined with them.

The report touches on the theoretical questions around the concept of Islamophobia, noting some debates in the literature and pointing out the most salient definitional solutions. It then moves on to explore the actual phenomenon of anti-Muslim racism in British media narratives over essentially two discrete periods – the pre-9/11, and the post-9/11 eras. This exploration is conducted by discussion of the best available evidence as contained in a series of academic and policy studies, including detailed empirical research.

The report then explores the debilitating societal impacts of these anti-Muslim narratives in terms of community cohesion generally, and an exacerbation of racist anti-Muslim violence specifically. Overall, it finds that a persistence of anti-Muslim trends in British media reporting on issues relating to Islam and Muslims has directly contributed to inaccurate stereotypes and misconceptions about British Muslims in wider British society, and thus to an increasingly hostile climate that has enabled an escalation of anti-Muslim hate crimes over the last decade.

Based on this evidence, the report concludes with a series of recommendations for the Leveson Inquiry to explore - without compromising the fundamental right of freedom of speech - in order to develop a more robust regulatory system capable of holding the British media to account for instances of inaccurate, racist anti-Muslim reporting practices which demonise entire communities.

## **Executive Summary**

### ***Racism in the Fourth Estate?***

Although it is widely assumed that racism in British society is by now a marginal phenomenon, unfortunately this is not the case. Research shows that not only do a third of the British population admit to racism, but that the more insidious phenomenon of 'institutional racism' continues to pervade a range of British social institutions, including the police service, the judiciary, the NHS, and the education system.

Where does the media fit into this spectrum? Over ten years ago, ethnic minorities as a whole were severely under-represented in employment in mainstream British media institutions, including both broadcasting and print. But despite a range of efforts to rectify this through better regulation, codes of conduct, and more robust internal procedures, the current situation has barely improved. To this day, ethnic minorities, including Muslims, still find themselves severely under-represented in the mainstream media.

Compared to a decade or more ago, the success of anti-racism campaigns was largely to shift the parameters of reporting with often subliminally racist undertones. Rather than focusing directly on minorities, racist media reporting has increasingly emphasised the alleged dangers posed by a new range of 'Others', namely, Muslims, asylum seekers, foreigners, Gypsies, Roma and Travellers. This shift has very much involved a re-focusing of the very nature of racist discourse away from ethnicity, toward religious, cultural and national modes of categorising 'racial' identity.

Within this decade, research has also shown that instances of such negative, unbalanced and inaccurate reporting targeting these social groups has a direct effect on community cohesion, to the extent of directly contributing to racist offences and violence on the streets of London.

### ***Islam and Muslims in the British Media***

Islamophobic and anti-Muslim reporting can be understood as a recent subset and culmination of this new milieu of cultural racism. All our consultants agreed that negative and unbalanced anti-Muslim reporting does occur amongst sectors of the British media, and should be addressed robustly. However, there was some disagreement about the term 'Islamophobia'.

Careful analysis of the term shows that if Islamophobia is to be deployed as a meaningful sociological category, it must retain a precise definition which refrains from tarnishing the entirety of British society and its institutions under a broad 'Islamophobic' brush, while also distinguishing clearly between inaccurate anti-Muslim media discourses, anti-Muslim sentiment in society, and hate crimes targeted at Muslims and Muslim institutions. This does not mean a wholesale rejection of the concept of Islamophobia, but rather its refinement and cautious application in the context of careful and nuanced analysis.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, anti-Muslim discourses did not originate only after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but predated those attacks by some decades. Some sociological and



political research suggests compelling historical reasons for widely embedded regressive assumptions about Islam and Muslims within Western civilization due to past negative encounters between the Western and Islamic worlds in the context of colonisation and the Crusades.

Yet there is a need to move beyond such general concerns to an analysis of specific contemporary trends. A range of detailed academic studies of British media reporting in the decades and years prior to 9/11 demonstrate that although Muslims were a relatively marginal subject overall compared to current times, the bulk of such reporting was negative and systematically portrayed Islam as a monolithic entity associated with violence, intolerance and hatred of the West; while associating Muslim cultures with intolerance, anti-modernism, anti-pluralism, anti-liberalism, misogyny and patriarchalism.

Key findings from this research concerning pre-9/11 reporting:

- Between 1989 and 2001, the rise of Islamist militancy has been the primary component in the portrayal of Islam in the British press.
- British media reporting in this period relating to Muslims focused on three themes 1. The 1979 Iranian revolution and Iran's alleged support of terrorism, 2. Violence and extremism by Islamist militants within the Muslim world, 3. Violence and extremism by Islamist militants in the West.
- A study of British broadsheets from 1997 to 1998 found they associated the Muslim world with "extremism and terrorism", "despotism", and "sexism", while reporting of British Muslims focused on negative reporting of "Muslim violence in the public sphere", including terrorism, faith schools, and crime.
- For instance, 83.5 per cent of all articles in this period on the then conflict in Algeria cited "Islam" as the key factor explaining internal violence in the country.
- Analysis of two liberal and conservative British broadsheets between 1994 and 1996 found that 88 per cent reported Islam as a foreign phenomenon; and that British Muslims were most commonly linked with "fundamentalism", in a way suggesting their presence is a threat to mainstream British values endangering national cohesion
- A 2002 analysis of British press reporting by the *Guardian's* then Middle East editor conceded that reporting of Muslims consistently oriented around "four very persistent stereotypes", that Muslims are "intolerant, misogynistic, violent/cruel, strange/different."

After 9/11, the resulting scrutiny on Islam and Muslims led to an escalation of negative, inaccurate anti-Muslim reporting in the British media. The primary driver of this kind of reporting was the populist tabloid press, although the paucity of positive reporting and the lack of robust regulation enabled these discourses to then become routinely repeated by broadsheets and broadcasters, leading to the general predominance of anti-Muslim narratives. Thus, the systemic extent of this inaccurate, false and unbalanced racist reporting

targeting Muslims in Britain has now been documented by a range of independent empirical studies, and corroborated by the experiences of our consultants who have worked as editors, journalists and reporters in both broadcasting and print media.

Key findings from this research concerning post-9/11 reporting:

- Tabloid newspapers have played a leading role in inaccurate anti-Muslim reporting, but these often set the agenda for wider reporting practices throughout the media.
- A study of 352 articles over a randomly selected one week period in 2007 found that 91 per cent articles about Muslims was “negative”; four per cent positive; and five per cent neutral.
- Negative associations were linked to domestic terrorism, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran.
- 12 of the 19 papers had no positive associations at all; 96 per cent of tabloid articles were negative, compared with 89 per cent in broadsheets.
- More than half of the articles represented Islam as a “threat”, and that British Muslims are different to “us” and a threat to “us”.
- A wider survey of a sample of 974 British press articles from 2000 to 2008 found that two thirds of them portray British Muslims as a “threat” and a “problem”.
- A third focused on terrorism, and 22 per cent focused on cultural differences between British Muslims and non-Muslims.
- Four out of five most common discourses associated British Muslims with “threats, problems or in opposition to dominant British values”, with only 2 per cent suggesting Muslims “supported dominant moral values.”
- References to “radical Muslims” outnumbered references to “moderate Muslims” by 17 to one.
- Imagery associated with articles generally depicted Muslims as a homogenous mass.
- A further study of British press representations over a 15 year period found that the biggest shift in British press reporting after 9/11 was to associated British Muslims with terrorism and extremism; and with acts of terrorism consistently linked to Islamic belief. In all articles on terrorism, the “Muslimness” of perpetrators of terrorism is emphasised.
- Coverage of British Muslims has also focused on highlighting and stigmatising cultural differences with British values, focusing on the veil, honour killings, conversion, Muslim protests, Muslim separatism, immigration, and calls for censorship.
- British Muslims have been overwhelmingly associated with calling for the “Islamification” of the UK.

- Such British tabloid stories frequently set the agenda for wider newspaper and broadcasting media, even if they claim to attempt to report them impartially, with the effect of reinforcing the overall dominance of anti-Muslim narratives.

### ***The Islamophobic Impact of Anti-Muslim Media Reporting***

The predominance of anti-Muslim media reporting has had a systematically debilitating impact on community cohesion in the UK. Opinion polls and surveys through the last decade show that British non-Muslim perceptions of British Muslims have in fact increasingly deteriorated. Currently, a clear majority of the general British population views Muslims in the UK with suspicion and hostility, associates them with terrorism, extremism and sexism, and sees them as a homogenous mass inherently opposed to British values and national identity. These associations, of course, correlate with the same narrative frames that have come to increasingly dominate the way powerful sectors of the British media portray Muslims.

- From 2001 to 2006, the number of UK non-Muslims who said they felt threatened by Islam rose from 32 per cent to 53 per cent.
- From 2005 to 2006, the number of non-Muslims who believed that British Muslims have no loyalty to Britain and are prepared to carry out terrorism rose from 10 to 18 per cent.
- By 2009-2010, 67 per cent of non-Muslims were suspicious about British Muslim allegiances as citizens, and 58 per cent linked Islam with extremism.
- In 2010, 75 per cent of non-Muslims now believe Islam is negative for Britain, and that Muslims do not engage positively in society. 63 per cent do not disagree that “Muslims are terrorists”, and 94 per cent agree that “Islam oppresses women.”

Equally, a byproduct of this social polarisation is that many British Muslims increasingly see British media and society as a whole as ‘Islamophobic’, contributing to a greater sense of alienation and undermining a sense of belonging to British national identity. Far from contributing to the integration of Muslims, this reinforces extremist narratives and vindicates the anti-Western ideologies promoted by militants.

- In 2007, 63 per cent of British Muslims felt that British media portrayals of Muslims is “Islamophobic”; and 72 per cent of those reported they “don’t feel a sense of belonging” to Britain.

Most disturbingly, our consultants with journalistic experience warned that the culmination of this social polarisation was racist violence on the streets – a proposition strongly supported by range of detailed evidence. Correlating with the intensification of inaccurate and negative anti-Muslim reporting over the last decade, and the corresponding breakdown of community cohesion, there has been a documented escalation in racist and religiously aggravated violence in which British Muslims tend to be over-represented.

- In the eight years between 1999 and 2007, the number of offences identified as having an element of racist aggravation grew by approximately fourfold.
- A 2010 study of Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) figures notes that the number of persons referred to the CPS for possible prosecution for racially aggravated offences has experienced an overall “313 per cent increase”; although the number of recorded racial incidents has declined in London, it has more than doubled across the UK.
- The 2010/2011 CPS *Hate Crime Report* noted that the number of cases referred to the CPS by police on grounds of religious hostility had grown by 45 per cent.
- Successive CPS *Racist Incident Monitoring Reports* this decade show that Muslims have accounted for more than half of all incidents of religiously aggravated offences at 54 per cent; and that Muslims account for the largest faith group experiencing hate crimes.
- As of 2010, although Muslims represent 3 per cent of the UK population, they represent a massive 44 per cent (almost half) of those who have died in lethal racist attacks since the 1990s.
- Police figures from just two regions indicate a rough total of about 1,200 recorded anti-Muslim hate crimes as of 2011. Systematic under-reporting of anti-Muslim hate crimes due to lack of confidence in the police, and problematic police procedures in dealing with racist/religious aggravated offences means actual figures are much higher.
- From 9/11 until 2010, up to 60 per cent of mosques, Islamic centres and Muslim organisations in the UK have suffered at least one attack.
- In 2011, well over half of British Muslims report having experienced some sort of public Islamophobic abuse, harassment or intimidation.

Thus, the latest police figures and academic studies indicate that anti-Muslim hate crimes are now at record levels compared to the beginning of the decade. Two highly detailed case study reports of anti-Muslim hate crimes in London and the UK by a former Special Branch counter-terrorism officer at Scotland Yard’s Muslim Contact Unit demonstrate unequivocally that anti-Muslim media narratives have played a direct role in motivating perpetrators of such crimes. Evidence drawn on to support this conclusion includes direct interviews with victims, far right activists and witnesses confirming that specific anti-Muslim news stories routinely promoted by the tabloid press are regularly exploited to justify Islamophobic ideology, and further to legitimise hate crimes targeted at British Muslims.

## ***Conclusions & Recommendations***

There is a disturbing link between the escalation in anti-Muslim hate crimes, the rise in Islamophobic sentiments in general British society, and the role of powerful sectors of the British media in systematically promoting false, inaccurate and racist anti-Muslim narratives. This demonstrates that media reform of some kind is an urgent imperative for the future of Britain, community cohesion, and ultimately the integrity of the country’s national identity.

Based on the existing research, as well as the expert suggestions of our consultants, we put forward the following recommendations for the Leveson Inquiry to consider:

### Regulation and the Press Complaints Commission (PCC)

1. A key problem that has been identified with the PCC is that the code of conduct applies only to individuals who have been reported about inaccurately, with a resulting inability to launch third party complaints. Therefore the code of conduct must be amended to address discrimination against groups through false and inaccurate reporting, rather than just individuals.
2. Another key problem identified is that the PCC is simply not sufficiently independent from the media industry, and furthermore has no powers to impose meaningful sanctions or penalties capable of holding the media accountable for flagrant violations of the code. Thus, several consultants pointed out that a new regulatory framework must not only be independent from government and the press, but should include proper penalties, including fines, as well as a statutory right of reply which gives due prominence to retractions and corrections in the form of equal space.
3. The existing press code of conduct also needs to be revised in light of the extent to which social groups such as Muslims have been subjected to vilification and racist attacks due to irresponsible and inaccurate reporting, in order to ensure that the media acts in accordance with the protections afforded under existing equalities legislation. This revision should involve input from the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Department for Communities & Local Government.

### Under-Representation of Minorities and Muslims in the Media

4. The scarcity of minorities in general and Muslims in particular in the media in terms of employment is a fundamental structural problem that has contributed to the capacity of sectors of the British media to report inaccurately on Muslims with a degree of impunity. Robust measures must be pursued, backed with regulatory enforcement, to ensure that the British media as a whole pursue new policies of positive action to increase employment of minorities, including Muslims, with clear targets. This state of affairs will not change without pressure from government – therefore statutory reform is required to ensure that media institutions work towards ensuring that there is greater diversity in employment.

### Formal Engagement with British Minorities and Muslim Communities

5. Journalists and editors reporting on issues relating to minorities such as Muslims require appropriate training and education to ensure they have a grounded and valid understanding of these issues in all their complexity and diversity. Given the scale of the problem, this training should be mandatory.
6. Any new or reformed regulatory framework should include the establishment of an independent advisory panel to provide expert input to journalists and editors on

issues relating to minorities, including Islam and Muslims – perhaps by advising the PCC and/or its successor body.

7. Forums should be established by which media institutions are able to engage directly with British Muslims in order to develop a better understanding of their culture and values. While some consultants suggested that the impetus for this should originate from British Muslim community leaders and organisations, it is clear that due to obvious power disparities, such outreach initiatives should be commenced by media institutions. However, equally, Muslim communities should certainly attempt to be more proactive in their efforts to engage media both critically and constructively.

### *Protection of Journalists*

8. Finally, there is a need to ensure that journalists themselves are protected so that they are able to exert their ethical rights to resist editorial pressure to report inaccurately or in a way that involves racist denigration – as has already been unanimously voted for by unions at a TUC conference last year.

## 1. Racism in The Fourth Estate?

Despite the progress made over the last decades in terms of race relations and equal opportunities legislation, it would be naive to assume that the problem of racism has been solved. To the contrary, racism in the United Kingdom is very much alive and well. A recent survey by OnePoll of 2,000 British adults, 88 per cent of whom classified themselves as 'White British', found that a third admitted to regularly making comments or being involved in discussions which could be considered racist. Seventy one per cent blamed the government's "open door" immigration policy towards foreign nationals for the increase in racism in the country.<sup>1</sup>

It is not entirely surprising then, in this context, that many of our major institutions continue to suffer from the persistence of 'institutional racism'.<sup>2</sup> Several studies show that despite landmark improvements, institutional racism remains a persistent problem in Britain's judicial system, the police service, the NHS, and education system.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1. Under-Representation of Ethnic Minorities within the Media

So to what extent is this problem reproduced in Britain's mainstream media? Over a decade ago, Beulah Ainley studied the representation of black and Asian journalists in national newspapers in *Black Journalists, White Media*, finding that by the mid to late 1990s, out of the 3,000 journalists employed by national newspapers, only 20 were black. The National Union of Journalists estimated that in 1998, only 1.8 per cent of their 27,000-strong membership was black, compared to the national minority population of 5.27 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

This disparity was also reflected in television. A 2002 report by the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU) concluded that British television is "institutionally racist", with programme-makers excluding ethnic minorities and "ghettoising" them away from parts in mainstream shows. Indeed, Independent Television Commission (ITC) figures showed that many of the UK's leading television companies had cut back on ethnic minority employees in their programming and management departments, with several completely lacking minority staff. Thus, in 2001, seven major ITV franchises had no ethnic minorities in broadcasting management. At Channel 4 the percentage fell from 8.2 per cent in 2000 to 5.7 per cent last year. Similarly, in programme-making, Channel 4's percentage of employees from ethnic minorities had more than halved from 13.5 per cent to 6.6 per cent between 2000 and 2001. Five other ITV franchises had no ethnic minorities in their programme-making departments last year in 2001. Between 1999 and 2001, the number of ethnic programme-making staff at Carlton had dropped from 14 to 4, and at Granada from 39 to 19. Although the BBC had set a target of 4 per cent of its senior management to consist of ethnic minorities, as of 2002 the actual number was still below that at 3.4 per cent.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, there have been a range of improvements whose significance should not be overlooked. Statutory bodies such as the ITC, the Broadcasting Standards Council (BSC), the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), along with various internal complaints processes, have contributed to a regulatory framework giving greater priority to curbing racially offensive

representations in the media. Representation of minorities has improved, with tabloid newspapers giving greater space to minorities as sources and claim-makers, and up to three-quarters of news coverage carrying broadly anti-racist themes. And private and public sector broadcasting have undertaken a variety of institutional initiatives to self-monitor output and address under-representation of minorities in employment. Yet regressive problems have remained. Despite a generic endorsement of anti-racism, the discourse of demonisation has shifted away from minorities in general to more specific forms of Other, such as foreign nationals, asylum seekers and Muslims who by their religious or cultural identities are seen to represent a potential challenge to British citizens. Institutional monitoring and regulatory initiatives have also had mixed results, with little media accountability except for the most virulent racially offensive reporting, and very little improvements in representation of minorities in employment.<sup>6</sup>

Ten years on, very little has changed. A survey by the *New Statesman* earlier this year concluded, shockingly, that “ethnic minorities are still largely absent from opinion pages, senior executive roles and staff jobs in the media.” The survey found not a single national newspaper editor or political editor who was non-white; that three national newspapers had not a single non-white comment writer; and that overall the British broadsheet press has only 5 non-white fixed weekly columnists. Indeed, over the country’s eight main national newspapers, encompassing a total of about 261 writers in the comment and opinion pages for a one week period, there were only 11 non-white writers.<sup>7</sup>

## **1.2. The Shift of Racist Representations in Media Discourses**

Just as there have been negligible improvements in the under-representation of ethnic minorities in employment in the media over the last decade, the way in which the media represents ethnic minorities despite some progress remains problematic. The increasing illegitimacy of reporting that could be construed as racially offensive has led to a general change in the way ethnic minorities are portrayed. Yet this has meant a re-drawing of the boundaries of ‘included’ and ‘excluded’ social groups, rather than an elimination of problematic reporting practices. While ethnic minorities in general are therefore now broadly accepted as part of an ‘included’ group of British citizens in the media, foreigners, asylum seekers and religious groups such as Muslims are frequently cast outside this sphere of inclusion.<sup>8</sup>

Since 9/11, 7/7 and a spate of attempted bombing plots and conspiracies through this last decade related to Muslim extremists born and/or brought up in the UK, Muslim religious and cultural identity - and its compatibility with British national identity - have been under increasing scrutiny in the media.<sup>9</sup>

This shift has been noted and documented by a number of independent agencies. In a joint submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD) published by the Runnymede Trust, nineteen UK anti-racist NGOs observed that the media’s role in “spreading prejudice against certain ethnic and religious groups in the UK remains a very serious concern” – the main victims of such problematic reporting are “Muslims, migrants, asylum seekers, and Gypsy and Travellers.” Reporting on immigration has focused



inordinately on negative representations about “illegal immigrants”, who are inaccurately portrayed as having wide access to jobs and social benefits that they are not entitled to. Similarly, coverage of asylum is often “disproportionate, inaccurate and hostile”, with repeated association of asylum seekers with words like “flood”, “wave”, “bogus”, “criminal” and “fraudulent” giving the inaccurate impression that abuse by applications of the UK’s asylum seeking process is of enormous scale, when it in fact applies only to a very small proportion of people who enter the UK. Similarly, negative reporting about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities often uses highly offensive language the effect of which is to criminalise these entire communities.<sup>10</sup>

### **1.3. Media Reporting and Racist Violence**

Most disturbingly, several studies confirm that there is a link between widespread racially problematic reporting in the media about these social groups, and instances of racist violence against the same groups. The Runnymede Trust points to recent research indicating “that the targeting of minority groups in the media has led to these groups being violently attacked.”<sup>11</sup> The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) notes that: “Muslims, migrants, asylum-seekers and Gypsies/Travellers are regularly presented in a negative light in the mainstream media”, and that “civil society actors have in some cases observed direct links between minority groups targeted by the media and minority groups targeted in violent attacks.”<sup>12</sup>

A Kings College London study commissioned by the Mayor of London in 2004 tracked national press stories on asylum seekers and levels of racism in London, and also asked nine organisations to monitor racist incidents. The study concluded that there was “clear evidence” that negative, unbalanced and inaccurate national reporting was likely to “promote fear and tension” between different ethnic communities in a way that “makes racial harassment more likely.” Not only did language used in local racist incidents mirror themes reported in certain national newspapers, active racists re-used these press reports in some incidents of intimidation. The study also warned that unreported racist harassment could be increasing as a consequence of negative media practices.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Islam and Muslims in the British Media

It is in this context of a link between racist media narratives and the danger of exacerbating actual racist violence and inter-communal tensions that the role of the media in reporting about British Muslims should be understood. A wide range of literature has studied the way Islam and Muslims are reported in the mainstream media. Much of this work is associated with the notion of 'Islamophobia', a highly contested concept both in sociological theory as well as in public commentary. The idea of Islamophobia conveys a distinctive form of racism and bigotry targeted specifically at members of Muslim communities, reinforced by negative stereotypes about Islam.

There can be little doubt that British Muslims do face a disadvantage in the way they are reported in the media overall, although this relates primarily to tabloid journalism. While this does not mean that the entire British media establishment should be seen as Islamophobic, the tendency to report negative stories has put British Muslims in general on the backfoot.

**Richard Peppiatt, former tabloid reporter for the *Mail on Sunday* and the *Daily Star*, who has already testified before the Leveson Inquiry, told us that:**

***“There is no doubt that Muslims face a serious disadvantage in the way they are covered in the British press. The reason for this is that underlying media coverage of Muslims is a base assumption that ultimately when it comes to Muslims, there is a problem with them in relation to British society and values. When you have a base assumption that there is a problem then inevitably resulting narratives are built around that assumption. This doesn't have to even be an overt process, but narratives can become subliminally framed in that way. Consequently, it's fair to say that Muslims are always disadvantaged. This is also due to a lack of any positive coverage of the good work and great things that Muslims do. If these are never highlighted it is hard to shape people's perceptions in a positive manner.”***

Some consultants to this project, however, expressed mixed feelings about the use of the term Islamophobia to describe the British media's attitude to Islam and Muslims. While noting that inaccurate anti-Muslim reporting was certainly a problem in relation to certain sectors of the media, they observed that this did not warrant ascribing Islamophobia to the whole of the British media establishment.

**Charlie Beckett, former Programme Editor at Channel 4 News, ITN (1999-2006) said:**

***“There is a particular problem with a few tabloids some of the time, but generally I think that much of the media goes out of its way not to be Islamophobic. There is a difference between Islamophobia and taking a stance against, for example, 'extremist' Muslims or being in favour of the Iraq war... What is wrong is when the Islamic or Muslim component of a story is highlighted when it is irrelevant... Generally I think the tone has been less strident and aggressive compared with the period in/after the London bombings when the press went a bit Muslim mad.”***

**Rita Payne, former Asia Editor at BBC World TV, similarly noted that:**

***“British media is a very broad category - there are huge differences between serious media and tabloids. I would most certainly agree that papers like the Daily Mail and Sun could be seen as Islamophobic, but I would not say the same about the BBC or other broadcasting channels.”***

Additionally, **Tehmina Kazi, Director of British Muslims for Secular Democracy**, disagreed that Islamophobia was an appropriate term to describe the British media’s approach to Muslims as a whole, as this oversimplifies the nature of problem.

The **Rt. Hon. Stephen Timms MP, a former Minister, and currently Vice-Chair of the Labour Party and Shadow Financial Secretary to the Treasury** also remarked:

***“My position is that there is a clear problem of anti-Muslim bias in parts of the British media. Newspapers publish gleefully negative reports - and the number of these, and of individual Muslims willing to provide them, is a real problem too - but ignore more positive ones. I am a member of the All Party Group on Islamophobia. I have suggested there that Islamophobia may not be the right word. It appears to mean hatred of Muslims, when the real problem is lower level and more widespread suspicion.”***

None of these consultants dismissed the reality that inaccurate anti-Muslim reporting is a serious problem in parts of the British media. However, their reservations suggest that any use of the term Islamophobia needs to be done so very precisely, and without making sweeping generalisations about the media, government and/or other social institutions as a whole.

## **2.1. Islamophobia? The Reality of Rising Anti-Muslim Hostility and Bigotry**

In 1997, the Runnymede Trust offered its seminal definition of Islamophobia as a set of attitudes: Islam is perceived as a static, unchanging monolithic block; it is separate and “other”; it lacks values in common with other culture; is inferior to the West; and is irrational, primitive, sexist, violent, aggressive, and supportive of terrorism. Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices against Muslims and the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society, such that anti-Muslim hostility becomes normalised.<sup>14</sup>

In 2004, the Council of Europe defined Islamophobia as “the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them. Whether it takes the shape of daily forms of racism and discrimination or more violent forms, Islamophobia is a violation of human rights and a threat to social cohesion.”<sup>15</sup>

However, a number of scholars have raised important reservations about the concept of Islamophobia. Marcel Maussen points out that Islamophobia is often deployed to encompass and explain a diversity of different phenomena under one catch-all category. Here, disparaging discourses about Islam and Muslims, as well as state-sanctioned policies and acts of racial violence, are all reduced to a single ideological ‘fear’ or ‘phobia’ of Islam – the origins of which itself are unexplained.<sup>16</sup>

This lack of conceptual clarity does not mean the concept of Islamophobia is without validity, but that its use as an all-explanatory category is problematic. As Chris Allen points out in his seminal treatment of the subject, a more robust definition of Islamophobia “would mean differentiating between Islamophobia as an ideology that informs and shapes our speech, attitudes and thoughts, and an Islamophobia which results in exclusionary and discriminatory practices including violence and abuse.”<sup>17</sup>

Particularly in relation to media discourse in the UK, and the persistence of anti-Muslim hate crimes over recent years, it is important to avoid unnecessarily conflating these two phenomena simplistically as twin faces of an overarching ideological hatred of Islam. This caution cannot, however, mean that the concept of Islamophobia should simply be rejected, as it is indisputable that hostility and discrimination toward Muslims in the UK has increased dramatically in the last decade in a range of sectors, and certainly within the British media.

As **Jason Beattie, Political Editor at *The Daily Mirror***, informed us:

***“In general, but not exclusively, the portrayal of Muslims in the mainstream media has been unsatisfactory... [and has included] sloppy and sometimes stereotypical reporting.”***

The deployment of the term ‘Islamophobia’ is therefore pursued here with caution, and is used interchangeably with the notions of anti-Muslim hostility and bigotry.

Thus, as **Daanish Masood, Media & Partnerships Officer at the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations**, expressed:

***“Whether or not we use the term ‘Islamophobia’ it is indisputable that anti-Muslim narratives have over the last decade become increasingly common in prominent parts of UK media.”***

## ***2.2. Muslims in the Media: Derogatory Discourses - Pre-9/11***

Multiple studies of British media representations of Islam and Muslims over the last decade produce a disturbing picture of a pattern of irresponsible and inaccurate reporting which for the most part portrays Islam and Muslims in a highly negative fashion.

As Elzaine Elgamri argues, negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims are not simply a new phenomenon spontaneously arising in response to the 9/11 and other terrorist attacks. On the contrary, they are deeply engrained in Western civilization, having been “resolutely established in the discourse of colonization and invasion.” Negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims “first emerged during the early encounters between Islam and Christian Europe, in the eighth century, and continued over the centuries with varying degrees of intensity, until the epoch of the mass media.” Contemporary press coverage of Islam and Muslims “reinforces the pre-existing negative image of both in the readers’ collective memory.” This focuses on representing Islam as a single, monolithic form that overlooks demarcations between militant, moderate and liberal interpretations of Islam, and in particular often ignores that militant versions are only adhered to by a tiny minority: “Central to this image is

the view of Islam as a monolithic entity associated with violence, intolerance and hatred of everything Western; hence the blanket association of Muslim cultures with intolerance, anti-modernism, anti-pluralism, anti-liberalism, misogyny and patriarchalism.”<sup>18</sup>

But we should be cautious about adducing institutional Islamophobia here. **Brian Cathcart, Professor of Journalism at Kingston University**, pointed out to us that: “Journalism, whether we like it or not, deals with what is new and dramatic and tends to focus on the negative. So it has been unavoidable that the news media have carried much that was negative in relation to Islam and Muslims.” In this context, he urges us to remember that “some reputational damage to all Muslims was probably inevitable as a consequence of the activities of extremists. Something similar happened to Irish people during the time of the IRA bomb campaigns in English cities, though to a lesser degree. I think of this as a reflex in society which is likely to be reflected in newspapers.”

However, **Professor Cathcart** also emphasised that while some degree of negativity might therefore be expected, this does not absolve the British media of grossly inaccurate and racist reporting concerning Muslims:

***“None of this means that journalists do not have a responsibility to report the world fairly and accurately. Nor does it excuse casual stereotyping, irresponsible generalisations and other poor journalistic practice... it remains a responsibility of editors and journalists to be fair and accurate, and to avoid reporting and commentary that is racist or displays religious intolerance or bigotry. In this, where Muslims are concerned, I think some of the country’s top-selling newspapers have too often failed... I have no doubt that damaging stereotypes have been adopted and repeated by some newspapers, and that they have all too readily repeated and embellished stories that played to prejudice more than they conformed to truth. Since these papers enjoy such wide circulation, this cannot fail to disadvantage Muslims in British society.”***

Professor Cathcart’s observations are borne out by detailed research. Focusing on representations of Islam in three major British broadsheets – *The Times*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian* – Elgamri examines their coverage of four events: the Khomeini death sentence religious edict (*fatwa*) against the novelist Salman Rushdie in 1989, the rise of the Taliban movement to power in Afghanistan in 1996, the Luxor killing of foreign tourists in Egypt in 1997 and the September 11th attacks on New York and Washington in 2001. She finds that “The rise of Islamic militancy in the last three decades has been the primary component in the construction and portrayal of the image of Islam in the British press”, a process which has focused on essentially three themes: 1. the 1979 Iranian revolution and Iran’s alleged involvement in supporting terrorism; 2. violent acts and excessive practices by Islamist militant groups in some Muslim countries; 3. violent acts and threats by Islamist militant groups and figures which transcend the boundaries of the Muslim world. The consequence is that the dominant narrative about Islam promoted by these leading British broadsheets was highly negative, largely associating the faith and its followers with violence, terrorism and extremism.<sup>19</sup>

Elgamri's work has been corroborated by several parallel studies of British broadsheet representations of Muslims. J. E. Richardson, for instance, examines reporting of 'Islam and/or Muslim related' topics from October 1997 to January 1998 in *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, the *Independent on Sunday*, and the *Sunday Times*. Richardson finds that overwhelmingly these broadsheets associated the Muslim world with "military threat", "extremism and terrorism", "despotism" and "sexism", while disassociating British Muslims from UK national identity through creating a split between "British" and "Other", resulting in "the negative 'othering' of British Muslims" through representation of "Muslim violence in the public sphere" on issues such as "terrorism", faith schools, and crime. Thus, during this period 83.5 per cent of all related articles reporting on the conflict in Algeria at the time cited "Islam" as a factor explaining the violence. Further, 64.9 per cent of the articles only mentioned Algeria, and ignored the roles and interests of other powers such as the UK, the US and France in exacerbating the conflict, thus characterising it as a purely internal phenomenon.<sup>20</sup>

Elizabeth Poole focuses on an empirical analysis of reporting relating to Islam and Muslims in only two broadsheets – *The Times* and *The Guardian* – but over a much longer two year period between 1994 and 1996. Once again, her findings are disturbing: Islam is still seen as a foreign phenomenon (88% of the survey) in the British press; Islam is the third most widely reported major faith (22%), behind Christianity and Judaism; British Muslims are most commonly linked, in descending order, with issues of belief, education, fundamentalism, world affairs, relations with Christianity, adjustment to culture, and racism; Islam is explained, often negatively, by comparison with Christianity; anti-Muslim sentiment is largely depicted as a justified response to Islamic fundamentalism; most common stereotypes centre around security concerns, Islam as a threat to mainstream British values, and the idea of irreducible cultural differences between British people and Islam; Muslim women only featured predominantly in 14 per cent of articles about British Islam; British Muslims mostly appear in news stories, features and editorials and hardly anywhere else.<sup>21</sup>

Overall, Poole points out that the tenore of media coverage is to portray Muslims as endangering national cohesion when viewed in a British context, but as exotic and menacing when viewed in the context of foreign affairs. In general, she finds, Muslims are characterised by the British press in terms of "primitivism, deviance, disruption and irrationality, and as intransigent yet perfidious."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, in his 2002 analysis of representations of Islam and Muslims in the British press, Brian Whitaker, then Middle East Editor at *The Guardian*, concluded that: "There are at least four very persistent stereotypes that crop up time and again in different articles. These tell us that Muslims are a) intolerant, b) misogynistic, c) violent or cruel, d) strange or different." Whitaker argues that such stereotypes persist not necessarily due to the racism of individual journalists or editors – though in some cases that may well exist – but primarily due to a lack of familiarity amongst reporters and columnists with Islam, its diversity, and complexity, leading to a widespread ignorance of "basic facts" around Islam; the problem that news coverage tends to be negative as "we tend to write about Muslims mainly when they cause trouble"; and a serious dearth in Muslim representation in employment in British media.<sup>23</sup>

### **2.3. Escalation of Anti-Muslim Discourse - Post-9/11 to the Present**

It is therefore clear that the prevalence of racist discourses within the British media towards Muslims long preceded the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, 9/11 and other terrorist activities by a minority of militant Islamists have not only led to a spike in reporting relating to Islam and Muslims, but have also accompanied a persistent escalation of negative coverage.

The experiences of **Lord Nazir Ahmed of Rotherham** with several British tabloid newspapers illustrate exactly how a combination of racist anti-Muslim sentiment and poor journalistic standards can generate Islamophobic media coverage. Lord Ahmed has been a member of the Labour Party for 37 years and a life peer for over a decade, and as such is perhaps the most popular Muslim politician amongst Muslims communities in the UK. He explains:

***“Since 9/11, the western media and in particular British media have demonised Muslims in one way or the other. Media reports always connect someone’s crime with the religion of Islam, rather than their citizenship or profession. For example when Lord Honey, Lord Taylor and other MPs were sent to prison the media did not say ‘Christian’ MPs or Lords have gone to prison – however, even on minor issues the media insists on writing ‘Muslim Peer’.***

***I first came across this horrific exaggeration and sensationalising in the media when a Young Palestinian man came to see me at the House of Lords for some help in relation to his ‘control order’. Abu Rida approached me at the Regents Park Mosque and I asked him to come to the House of Lords and bring all his relevant documents so that I can raise his case with the Home Secretary. However, three days later all the British media including The Sun, The Mail, The Express, and The Mirror all sensationalised the headlines as ‘al-Qaeda in Commons,’ stating effectively that a Muslim Labour Peer has invited an al-Qaeda suspect for tea in the House of Lords. It was only later that the true facts in relation to Abu Rida’s appointment were printed.***

***I have experienced a lot of hate mail and verbal threats in relation to this incident. My second experience was regarding the Knighthood of Salman Rushdie when the Daily Telegraph deliberately misquoted me from a French newspaper, by stating that I had declared that the 9/11 attackers were martyrs. I did not say anything of the kind, and I had to obtain the recording from the French newspaper for the Daily Telegraph to withdraw their remarks. Similar stories have been circulated in relation to the anti-Islam Dutch MP Geert Wilders’ visit to the United Kingdom when Melanie Phillips in her article (February, 2010) for the Spectator claimed falsely that ‘Lord Ahmed has threatened to surround the British Parliament with 10,000 people if Geert Wilders was to visit the British Parliament’.***

***Although I complained to the Press Complaints Commission, the Telegraph justified its false reporting by saying that the israelnewsagency.com had originally published this allegation, and therefore I was not able to pursue my complaint through the PCC.”***

Most recently, Lord Ahmed's political work was directly affected due to the Labour Party's pre-emptive reaction to false and inaccurate media reporting on his visit to Pakistan in early 2012. The *Daily Mail* and other newspapers repeated allegations made in a Pakistani newspaper, the *Express Tribune*, that Lord Ahmed had given a public speech in which he called for a £10 million bounty for the capture of President Obama. In response to this allegation, the Labour Party pre-emptively suspended Lord Ahmed from membership of the party, although it had not yet carried out an investigation of the claims. The *Daily Mail's* headline read: **"Labour Peer Suspended After He 'Offered £10m for Capture of Barack Obama' Claiming His Bounty on Terrorist Suspect has 'Insulted All Muslims'."**<sup>24</sup>

Within a matter of days, however, it emerged that Lord Ahmed had yet again been grossly misrepresented due to poor journalistic standards which avoided simple fact-checking procedures. Video footage of the speech obtained by Channel 4 showed that on the contrary, Lord Ahmed had called for justice, which he argued could be carried out by Tony Blair and George W. Bush being held to account for war crimes through due process by being tried in the International Criminal Court. He stated that he would be willing to raise funds to support a legal campaign to this end – a far cry from a ringing endorsement of illegal violence. "[The] footage of his speech, made in Urdu at a conference in Haripur on Friday, indicates that he was misquoted", observed *Telegraph* news reporter Murray Wardrop, to the newspaper's credit.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, the *Express Tribune*, the only newspaper to have printed the original allegations about a "bounty" on President Obama, officially retracted its claims and apologised for what it described as an error in its reporting.<sup>26</sup>

The *Daily Mail's* response to these developments is instructive – the newspaper refused to appropriately retract its previous false headline report on Lord Ahmed's speech, and couched its qualification as follows: "Lord Ahmed was suspended by the Labour party yesterday for allegedly putting a bounty on the heads of President Obama and former President GW Bush while supporting the man indicted for the Bombay terror attacks. It is unclear whether Ahmed actually said this. However his past record is not unblemished." The report was headlined **"Accusations Against Lord Ahmed Merely Highlight a Vile Anti-British Career."**<sup>27</sup> On 30<sup>th</sup> June 2012, Lord Ahmed's suspension was lifted by the Labour Party after the Party's investigation cleared him of the allegations.

**Former tabloid reporter Richard Peppiatt** thus points out that although generally Muslims are at a disadvantage due to the problem that primarily negative stories are viewed as newsworthy, there is a distinction between broadsheets and tabloids, with the latter in particular experiencing a serious decline in journalistic standards:

***"The problem is that tabloids like the Sun, the Star or the Express are not necessarily truth-seeking newspaper outlets. Their search for stories is very much impact driven, and there is a hunger to identify and frame stories in a way which can easily provoke an emotional and not a rational response. So rather than seeking the truth about an issue, tabloids often instead try to seek an angle that is most emotive, and which can create a story which by playing to the emotional part of our brains will have greater impact. This therefore can involve downplaying or omitting certain facts, while foregrounding minor facts. One example of this is a story run last year by a range of tabloids reporting that***



***Muslim councillors snubbed Britain's war heroes at medal giving ceremony for returning soldiers. The news reports said that the Muslims present refused to applaud and stand up at the ceremony, when in fact only one Muslim, a Respect councillor, hadn't clapped. Here, newspapers deliberately decontextualized the story, and reapplied a false context to give the impression that Britain and Islam are not compatible. In itself, the story of one Muslim not clapping is not a story that would make the editorial cut. So instead the story was spun to make it appear that the half the Muslims in the room did not applaud, and this creates a story with sufficient emotive content to make an impact, but which is actually untrue.***

***The reason the truth has become less important for the press is that news has moved from being a product of information, to a product of entertainment. Entertainment is about emotions, and playing on people's fears and prejudices in a way that encourages people to keep buying products, in this case, the product being the newspaper. It is the same principle as advertising. In other words, news has become dominated by commercial imperatives designed to maximise sales. To do that your story needs to be as emotive as possible, so you need a 'goody' and a 'baddy' – hence, tabloids distil complex social realities into a more simplistic black and white world, where there are no shades of grey. Since 9/11, Muslims have been caricatured as the 'baddy' to create emotional tension that will frame emotive stories to sell more newspapers. Once upon a time, it was Jews in Germany who were caricatured in this way – instead of a cartoon of a Jew with a big nose burning money, we have journalists pressured to go out of their way to invent negative stories and depictions of Muslims. At this point, the information the press is putting out stops being real journalism and becomes, simply, propaganda.***

***And unfortunately, this is continuing with impunity. No one stops newspapers doing this. The PPC for example does not accept third party complaints about misrepresentation toward ethnic groups or religious groups. So at the moment there is literally nothing to stop newspapers behaving in this way."***

How prevalent is this sort of biased and inaccurate reporting? Amongst our consultants, there was a difference of opinion, with some arguing the problem of anti-Muslim bias is very bad, and others arguing that it is improving. So far existing research leans toward the former conclusion, suggesting a worrying prevalence of inaccurate anti-Muslim reporting; and that such reporting, when it occurs, does so with impunity.

A 2007 report commissioned by the Greater London Authority undertook a survey of British press coverage of Islam and Muslims during a randomly selected one week period chosen a month in advance. A total of 352 articles were identified relating to Muslims from across the mainstream national press, including *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Financial Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Sun*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Star*. Ninety one per cent of the articles were found to be "negative" in their associations; four per cent to be positive; and five per cent neutral. The main negative associations were linked to domestic terrorism, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. In 12 of the 19 papers studied, there were no positive associations at all. In the tabloids, 96 per cent of articles were negative, compared with 89 per cent in the broadsheets. Overall, almost a half of all articles represented Islam as

a “threat”, a third of these in relation to the UK and two thirds in relation to the world. The general narrative was that “Islam is profoundly different from, and a serious threat to, the West; and that within Britain Muslims are different from ‘us’, and a threat to ‘us’.” On this basis, the report advocates a more precise definition of Islamophobia focusing on racist anti-Muslim discourses. Islamophobia:

**“... presents narratives about Islam and Muslims as threats at the same time as ignoring or misrepresenting alternative narratives; does so with closed not open ways of thinking, talking and engagement; is likely to increase insecurity and vulnerability amongst Muslims; is likely also to provoke anxiety, fear and panic amongst non-Muslims; is unlikely therefore to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of discrimination against Muslims; is unlikely to contribute to an informed debate about ways of maintaining and developing Britain as a multicultural, multi-faith democracy.”<sup>28</sup>**

A far more comprehensive study was commissioned by Channel 4 and conducted by the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, analysing a sample of 974 British newspaper articles related to Islam and Muslims in the UK from 2000 to 2008. The study found that two thirds of the articles about Muslims in Britain portray them as either a “threat” or a “problem”. A third of stories focused on terrorism, while 22 per cent highlighted cultural differences between British Muslims and non-Muslims. Four out of five of the most common story threads associated Islam and Muslims “with threats, problems or in opposition to dominant British values” – only a tiny 2 per cent suggested “that Muslims supported dominant moral values.” The most common words deployed in relation to Islam were “terrorist”, “extremist”, “fanatical”, “fundamentalist”, “radical”, and “militant” – with “references to radical Muslims outnumber[ing] references to moderate Muslims by 17 to one.” For the most part, these articles on British Muslims utilised a similar range of images – either of the “single Muslim male”, or “a group of unidentified Muslim men” – the effect being to portray Muslims in Britain as a homogenous mass.<sup>29</sup>

A variety of other independent academic studies corroborate and reinforce these findings. For example, Elizabeth Poole examines British press representations of British Muslims over a 15 year period, encompassing before and after 9/11, including: articles on Islam and Muslims in Britain from 12<sup>th</sup> September 2001 to 25<sup>th</sup> October 2001 in *The Times* and *The Guardian*; a quantitative analysis of all 2003 articles on British Muslims and Islam in *The Times* and *The Guardian* after the invasion of Iraq; analysis of coverage in all British national newspapers after the 7/7 bombings including the trial of British Muslim Mohammed Atif Siddique for activities relating to terrorism and the 2007 Glasgow Airport attack; an examination of two months of newspaper coverage (*The Times*, *The Sun*, and *The Yorkshire Evening Post* - a local paper) from 2008 including all references to Islam and Muslims in all articles from those months, and an analysis of one week’s television coverage from 2009 (BBC1, BBC2, and ITV1); press coverage of the deportation of anti-Islam Dutch MP Geert Wilders from Britain following an invitation to attend a screening of his film *Fitna* in the House of Lords (February 2009), incorporating all articles from all national newspapers in print and online, as well as comments posted online by readers. From this extensive survey, Poole draws a series of important conclusions which are quoted below extensively:

**“The most significant shift in the coverage of British Muslims post-9/11 was in the association with terrorism. Whilst this was clearly the prevailing image of global Islam prior to 9/11, British Muslims were not directly attributed with this label (see Richardson, 2004). Rather, it was Muslims in Britain; exiles, dissidents and asylum seekers, who were categorized as extremists. Suggestions of covert activity, such as raising funds for political groups abroad, were made as were links to the wider Muslim community but the physical threat remained at a distance. This shift occurred immediately following September 11th when coverage converged dramatically around three major topics: terrorism, counter terrorism measures and discrimination against Muslims ... Rather than providing any historical or political context, the acts of terrorism are clearly linked to Islamic belief. The link between religion and violence is made frequently... The perpetrators’ Muslimness is emphasized, other motivations, if mentioned, are dismissed. Belief is the central explanation for behaviour... our own research has found that militancy is the most frequently referred to subject in relation to Islam...**

**[Another] theme, which suggests that Muslims have inherently different cultural and religious values that conflict with ‘British values’ (a construction) dominates the coverage of British Muslims and runs through a variety of popular topics such as education, relationships, legal issues, gender issues, religious practice, criminality, and political values... Whilst there has been a shift in the types of stories used to express this since the late nineties there is little change in its message: Within a binary exclusive relationship ‘we’, the British, have been too tolerant. This has been abused by ‘them’ as they seek to impose ‘their’ way of life on ‘us’. Many of these articles therefore concentrate on the restrictive censorious ‘nature’ of Islam in contrast to liberal Britain. Examples of this include coverage of the veil, honour killings, conversion, Muslim protest, Muslim separatism, immigration, and censorship versus freedom of speech. Since 9/11 these articles have increasingly highlighted the ‘persecution’ of Christians and focused on the increasing ‘Islamification’ of the UK made permissible by weak government.**

**In this context Muslims have been represented as an immigrant group that are not only a drain on resources but have brought alien values and practices into the UK threatening ‘our values’. Issues that have arisen out of a complex changing political and social context are blamed on ‘cultural difference’ and increasingly since 9/11, and the subsequent ‘war on terror’, are linked to a security threat. 9/11, therefore, is one of those contexts that have shaped the way Muslims have been constructed in public discourse. 9/11 created a climate in which the outcomes of neoliberal restructuring of the economy could easily be displaced onto the problems of ‘Muslim integration’.”<sup>30</sup>**

Thus, existing research supports the conclusion outlined to us by **Professor Julian Petley, Head of Journalism Research at Brunel University and author of seminal study, *Pointing the Finger: Islam & Muslims in the British Media* (2011):**

***“It would be extremely difficult to claim that Islam and Muslims are represented adequately by the British media, although some media are more culpable in this respect***

**than others. The worst offenders are undoubtedly the national tabloid press, both red-top and mid-market, for whom, ever since 9/11, Islam and Muslims are clearly a 'problem', and presented as such. Here coverage is consistently critical, hostile and negative, and actions by certain Muslim groups and individuals, such as disrupting military occasions, are seized upon and treated as if in some way typical of British Muslims as a whole. It is primarily here that totally untrue stories tend to appear, along the lines that Christmas and piggy banks have been banned because they 'offend Muslims'.**

**Negative, if rather less sensationalised, coverage also characterises the 'up-market' Telegraph and, to a lesser extent, The Times - but the main difference between papers such as these and the tabloids, on this subject, is one of style and presentation rather than of substance and underlying ideology. That just leaves the minority liberal press, the Guardian and the Independent, which, by comparison, are much fairer, and at least the latter employs a Muslim columnist in Yasmin Alibhai-Brown. But although they may try to be fair (or at least accurate) they devote relatively little space to Muslims and Islam (relative, that is, to their presence and importance in the UK population), and these often find themselves reported in the context of problems and conflicts of one kind or another.**

**Much the same is also true of the broadcasters. It is also important to point out that although these are bound by statute to report impartially, they often seem to select news stories which have started life in the anti-Muslim press (this is particularly true of the Today programme on Radio 4). The broadcasters will, of course, claim that they deal with these stories impartially, but stories which exist only because of the agendas of certain newspapers should simply not be on the broadcast news agenda in the first place, because no amount of 'impartial' treatment will dispel the ideology which is at their heart, and the propagation of which was their original raison d'etre. But there are also programmes which cause one seriously to doubt the broadcasters' commitment to impartiality in a more everyday sense - for example the Panorama programme on the Muslim Council of Britain which I analyse at very considerable length in Pointing the Finger (OneWorld 2011), much of which appears to fly in the face of the BBC editorial guidelines on impartiality."**

### 3. The Islamophobic Impact of Anti-Muslim Media Reporting

The preceding analysis demonstrates that despite some salutary exceptions, anti-Muslim discourses have unfortunately become predominant in British media reporting, in both television and print, due to the impunity of primarily the tabloid press. There are, of course, clear differences between the way broadsheets, tabloids and television channels approach issues relating to Muslims, with some reporting being much better than others in certain sectors. However, the overall lack of positive stories, along with the lack of robust regulatory powers to hold media institutions to account for inaccurate racist reporting, has contributed to an overwhelming discourse of negativity in the British media on Muslims in the UK, whereby much of the populist tabloid press is able to set the agenda for the wider media.

As **Rachael Saunders, Labour Councillor for Tower Hamlets local authority**, informed us:

***“There are Muslims who are making a great contribution, but if they are reported in a positive light their faith is not emphasised. There isn’t a public language which describes the positive contribution British Muslims make.”***

While disparaging and derogatory narratives did exist prior to 9/11, these became far more widespread and normalised in the post-9/11 period. These predominant media narratives are racist – and thus Islamophobic – to the extent that they promulgate false, inaccurate and stereotypical caricatures of Islam and Muslims as a whole, with the effect of demonising and criminalising entire communities.

**Yasir Mirza, Head of Diversity & Inclusion at Guardian News & Media** explained to us how the search for newsworthy stories has led to a focus on the negative that has undermined balanced reporting on the reality of life for the majority of British Muslims:

***“I would say that the Muslim majority lose out... I think rather than trying to understand, reporters look for certain types of Muslims who will fuel their own hypothesis about Islam and Muslims. Of course, this is a general statement and not true of all reporters. The vast majority of Muslims lead normal lives. However, reports focus on the fringes: what some religious ‘nut’, or what some liberal reformist has said or done. Islam is being reported in the extremes, and that is necessary because that is ‘where’ the news is for some press... not in the middle, where the vast majority of Muslims reside.***

***Also, I think that Muslims are disadvantaged by consistently being homogenised into one group. There is a broad spectrum of diversity amongst Muslims, (often complex to understand) when taking in factors of religious orientation, ethnicity, family upbringing, social and economic status, age, and geography. The point being, there is no one ‘Muslim voice’, contrary, rather a plurality of them, with differing heterogeneous views that rarely gets reported on, or attempted to be understood.”***

The result of this is that anti-Muslim narratives tend to become predominant in the British media. Further evidence shows that this has deeply detrimental and long-lasting social consequences for Britain, community cohesion, citizenship and national identity.

On this, **Rachael Saunders** adds:

***“There are also issues around social cohesion and mutual understanding which are exacerbated by current media portrayals.”***

Similarly, former *Times* and *Observer* journalist **Burhan Wazir** warns us that:

***“The effect is obviously detrimental. And social cohesion is obviously one casualty.”***

This has directly contributed to a worrying social polarisation between Muslim and non-Muslim communities based on two fundamentally interrelated phenomena: increasingly negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims as a whole amongst general British society; and an intensifying sense of isolation and alienation from British society experienced by many British Muslims. This, in turn, has directly contributed to a documented escalation in racist violence against Muslims in Britain over the last decade.

**Journalism Professor Julian Petley** highlights the danger of the media’s role in exacerbating such social polarisation as follows:

***“If Muslims feel themselves to be demonised and stigmatised, and if non-Muslims are led to believe that Muslims and Islam pose an existential threat to the ‘English way of life’, then this cannot but seriously damage community cohesion. And, as noted earlier, this is particularly the case when globalisation is indeed causing problems for sections of English society - not least unemployment, as jobs are exported abroad. Add to this the results of specific government policies - not enough homes for people, over-crowded and under-resourced schools, and so on - and the situation is absolutely ripe for scapegoating visibly different Others.”***

In the following section, we will explore these themes, including evidence that anti-Muslim media narratives are closely linked to a rise in Islamophobic sentiment in British society, which has in turn created a climate conducive to the escalation of anti-Muslim hate crimes.

### **3.1. Social Polarisation**

A 2006 YouGov survey found that the number of non-Muslim Britons who believe that “a large proportion of British Muslims feel no sense of loyalty to this country and are prepared to condone or even carry out acts of terrorism” had nearly doubled from 10 per cent after 7/7 to 18 per cent a year later. The number of non-Muslims who believe that “practically all British Muslims are peaceful, law-abiding citizens who deplore terrorist acts as much as anyone else” fell from 23 per cent to 16 per cent in the same period. Further, 53 per cent of non-Muslims said they felt threatened by Islam – up from 32 per cent in 2001.<sup>31</sup>

Other polls corroborate this disturbing trend and show that by 2009-2010, general British sentiment toward Muslims in the UK has deteriorated even further, with an even larger proportion of the population holding deeply negative views toward British Muslims associating them with extremism and terrorism. A 2010 YouGov survey found that 58 per cent of Britons link Islam with extremism, and 69 per cent believe it encourages repression of

women.<sup>32</sup> In the same year, the British Social Attitudes survey found that just over half of Britons now regard the country as “deeply divided along religious lines”, and are “particularly concerned about Islam compared with other faiths.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the 2009 Gallup poll finds that only 36 per cent of the general population believes that Muslims are loyal to Britain – with the majority of 67 per cent thus remaining suspicious about Muslims’ allegiances as citizens.<sup>34</sup>

This rise in Islamophobic sentiment was corroborated by a separate 2010 study by DJS Research commissioned by the Islamic Education and Research Academy (IERA), which surveyed a “statistically robust” sample of 500 randomly selected non-Muslims. The survey concluded that three-quarters of the general population now believed that Islam was negative for Britain, and that Muslims did not engage positively in society. About 32 per cent believed that Muslims are a major cause of community tension. Sixty three per cent of people did not disagree with the statement “Muslims are terrorists” and 94 per cent agreed that “Islam oppresses women.” Those polled also admitted that they had little meaningful knowledge of Islam, and little interest in learning more. Four-fifths said they have less than very little knowledge about Islam, 40 per cent did not know who “Allah” referred to and 36 per cent did not even know who the Prophet Muhammad was. Furthermore, 60 per cent said they preferred not to receive any information about religion, while 77 per cent did not agree in any way that Muslims should do more to teach people about their faith.<sup>35</sup>

This polling data indicates that one impact of predominantly anti-Muslim narratives in the British media is the entrenchment of inaccurate stereotypical views about Muslims amongst wider British society. It also suggests that in the period from 2001 to 2010, as anti-Muslim media discourses have intensified, so have these Islamophobic sentiments amongst the general British population.

**As UN media expert Daanish Masood clarified, anti-Muslim narratives “are often based on inaccurate reporting which associates Muslims as a whole with a range of stereotypical images and ideas.” Such narratives “undermine social cohesion, contribute to a sense of alienation, and polarise communities.”**

Simultaneously, research strongly suggests a link between perceptions of Islamophobia in the British media amongst Muslims in the UK, and a growing sense of alienation and disaffiliation from British society amongst some British Muslims. A Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust sponsored study by the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) in London found that although “British Muslims still retain strong feelings of affiliation to British society”, “negative presentations of the media might cause feelings of disaffiliation to some extent.” The report notes that “intensive Islamophobic and racist attitudes in the media could be one of the major causes for the alienation of British Muslims from society.” Overall, levels of pessimism amongst British Muslims in their assessments of media portrayals of Muslims were high (63.4 per cent Islamophobic, 15.5 per cent racist and 9.4 per cent covertly destructive), and 71.9 per cent of those who felt the media was Islamophobic reported that they “don’t feel a sense of belonging” to Britain.<sup>36</sup>

Several of our consultants noted that the predominance of anti-Muslim discourses in the British media would contribute to the alienation of parts of British Muslim communities, at a time when community cohesion should be a major priority.

**Julian Bond, Director of the Christian Muslim Forum**, for instance, explained to us that:

***“Even the most engaged, integrated and inter faith-involved Muslims find it extremely wearying, frustrating and irritating, sometimes particularly so when comments of politicians and senior Christian leaders are reported. It sharpens the feelings of some Muslims that they are not accepted by British society, not welcomed and viewed as a threat. The reluctance of some people to sit next to those ‘dressed as Muslim’ on the London underground is an example of the impact on Muslims and non-Muslims. It has led to Muslims (including colleagues within the Forum) deciding not to wear some items of clothing (caps and robes) while in public, especially on public transport. Ironically, even calls for greater cohesion are aimed negatively at Muslims, this leading to less cohesion.”***

Women in particular can end up being victimised as a consequence. **Campaigner for progressive Islam and women’s rights, Tehmina Kazi**, pointed out to us that:

***“Uniquely for Muslims, one additional response has been an increase in the affirmation of their Muslim identity. This has simultaneously resulted in a monolithic and stereotypical portrayal of that identity by the media, without any recognition of other attributes. For example, most news coverage relating to Muslim women features a picture of a woman wearing a niqab. Also, there is often confusion in the terminology used by certain news outlets when describing Muslim issues. The word ‘hijab’ is sometimes conflated with the word ‘niqab’, and vice versa. This ends up distancing Muslims – particularly young Muslims – from mainstream society, as it gives the impression that their voices are not being heard in the public arena.”***

Thus, ironically, anti-Muslim discourses in the media not only serve to disenfranchise many British Muslims from a sense of belonging, but also to buttress extremist narratives.

The ***Guardian’s*** **Yasir Mirza** points out:

***“Certainly, it appears that the Muslim community hasn’t been enfranchised as much as we think, or like to think. Such stereotypes only reinforce extreme Muslim narratives that ‘the west hate Muslims,’ and that ‘the kuffar hate Muslims.’ Such reporting cripples the efforts of a great deal of institutions, communities and individuals that are working hard to overcome religious and cultural hurdles. Social cohesion just becomes a byword for: ‘we can abuse, ridicule and target you, but this is the cost of living in Britain’. Of course, this is false. No one should be subjected to the type of reporting (if you can even call it that!) that Muslims have been subjected to without any repercussions. But, since there is a general rise in Islamophobia here, in Europe and certainly in the US, these ‘reports’ feed into the paradigm that Muslims are a threat and so, there is no social appetite to challenge such reporting.”***



### 3.2. Racist Violence

Correlating with the intensification of anti-Muslim media discourses, and general hostility and suspicion toward British Muslims in wider society, there has been an escalation of racist violence targeted at Muslims in Britain. Unfortunately, a single reliable national dataset on anti-Muslim hate crimes over the last decade does not exist. Nevertheless, the picture that emerges from analysis of credible official sources and surveys evinces a definite rising trend. The role of anti-Muslim narratives in the British media in exacerbating the danger of racist violence toward Muslims in Britain should not be underestimated.

The perilous societal impact of inaccurate and irresponsible anti-Muslim reporting by sections of the British media was emphasised to us by **former tabloid reporter Richard Peppiatt**, who warns that tabloids are unwittingly playing into the hand not only of racists, but of far right extremists who routinely cite anti-Muslim reports to justify their racist attacks:

*“So much news coverage in today’s tabloids is about Britain’s fractured communities in which our youth are running riot. However, the press do not take responsibility for the role they play in creating the social tensions behind these fractured communities. If for example we look at reporting on, say, a racist murder of a Muslim, newspapers do not ask the crucial questions, why has that happened, why has someone snapped and carried out that racist attack? Maybe it’s because those responsible have been reading everyday that Muslims are a certain way.*

*Indeed, in the real world, for the most part, Muslims and other communities may well get on fine. What counts is not what’s happening in the real world – but what people perceive is happening. Because of this, lots of good work done by different communities is being undermined by newspapers, who unwittingly are playing into the hands of racists. All the news stories you will see on far right websites, internet forums and chat sites are taken from the British tabloid press like The Express, The Star and The Sun to justify their racist views to the effect that ‘this is what we’ve been saying all along’. False and inaccurate stories about Muslims routinely put out by the press are, in turn, routinely used as tools by far right groups to legitimise their case and gain followers.*

*The internet is full of forums of this kind, using mainstream newspaper reporting as proof that their hateful views about Muslims are true. Unfortunately, newspapers refuse to recognise their role in that. In a key sense, it doesn’t matter what’s happening on the ground, whether most communities are actually getting along fine – as long as people perceive there’s an issue, then by default it becomes an issue. And that’s why the role of the press in influencing perceptions is so critical here.”*

Is Peppiatt’s argument for a direct link between anti-Muslim racist violence, and the predominance of anti-Muslim narratives in the media, borne out by the available evidence?

Unfortunately, the evidence does support this conclusion. Not only has there been a rise in incidents of racist (and religiously aggravated) violence over the last decade, but Muslims have been over-represented in this violence. Furthermore, there is evidence of a correlation

between anti-Muslim media narratives and the racist discourses of perpetrators of these attacks, including far right extremists.

A 2005 study by the Open Society Institute notes that the “majority of Muslims come into contact with the criminal justice system as (direct or indirect) victims of crime.” Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, constituting up to 60 per cent of Muslims in the UK, are “more likely than other ethnic groups to be victims of crime, including racially motivated crime”, and also have “the lowest satisfaction levels with public-initiated police contact, and the lowest levels of confidence in the police.”<sup>37</sup> The evidence thus suggests that while there has been a spike in hate crimes, these are often not reported to the police due to lack of trust in the authorities and fear of discrimination.

Overall, the last decade has seen a trend of rising racist offences. The national total for racial incidents recorded by the police has risen every year since 1999/2000, when it stood at 47,701. The figure of 57,055 for 2007/8, although down on the previous year, was nevertheless nearly 20 per cent higher than in 1999/2000. According to the Institute of Race Relations (IRR), 93 per cent of the perpetrators of racist violence were white, just over 45 per cent of the victims were Asian, 18 per cent were black, and 7 per cent of them were Muslim.

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Since then, although the number of racially or religiously motivated offences recorded in England and Wales in 2010/11 was 31,486, down from a peak of 42,554 four years earlier, general racist incidents were far higher in number in 2010/11 than recorded offences at 51,187. Generally, in the eight years between 1999 and 2007, the number of cases identified as having an element of racial aggravation grew by approximately fourfold overall.<sup>39</sup> A 2010 IRR report also carefully analyses official crime figures, finding that: “... the data show not only that the incidence of such crimes has grown and, perhaps more significantly, become much more widely spread geographically across the country and therefore less heavily concentrated in London. Indeed, while the number of recorded racial incidents has declined significantly in London, it has more than doubled across the rest of the country, both in major conurbations and less populated areas.” Crown Prosecution (CPS) service figures similarly show that the number of persons referred to the CPS for possible prosecution for racially aggravated offences” has experienced an overall “313 per cent increase.”<sup>40</sup>

The CPS *Hate Crime Report 2007-08* confirmed an increase of 10 per cent in crimes involving racial or religious aggravation.<sup>41</sup> The following year’s *Hate Crime Report 2008-2009* found that the number of defendants charged with racially or religiously aggravated offences had risen from 50.7 per cent to 73.2 per cent.<sup>42</sup> The latest *Hate Crime Report 2010-2011*, the first to attempt to distinguish racist from religious offences, records that the number of “racist and religiously aggravated crime increased over 2010/2011.” The rise in reported religiously aggravated offences has been dramatic, with the CPS noting: “The total number of cases identified as involving crimes motivated by hostility on the grounds of religion that were referred to the CPS by the police increased by 45%.”<sup>43</sup>

A series of *Racist Incident Monitoring Reports* from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) demonstrate that during this period Muslims accounted for more than half of all incidents

involving religiously aggravated offences at 54 per cent; and that Muslims account for the largest faith group experiencing hate crimes.<sup>44</sup> This indicates that Muslims are overrepresented in religiously aggravated offences, which overall have continued to increase. Indeed, the Institute for Race Relations reports that: “The London bombings occurred in 2005 and all our research at the time indicated a backlash and a rise in racial violence against people assumed to be Muslim or Arab... Although Muslims represent 3 per cent of the population in the UK, they represent a massive 44 per cent, almost half, of those who have died [in lethal racist attacks since the late 1990s].”<sup>45</sup>

As of 2011, available statistical data does seem to indicate that anti-Muslim hate crimes are now at record levels. In June last year, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) confirmed a total of 762 Islamophobic offences in London since April 2009, including 333 in 2010/11 and 57 since April 2011 – bringing the total to 1,152. Some 40-60 per cent of “mosques, Islamic centres and Muslim organisations” in the UK have “suffered at least one attack since 9/11.” A police spokesperson reportedly conceded that the MPS was aware of “significant” under-reporting of hate crime, and acknowledged “missed opportunities” to keep victims safe.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the reliability of police procedures in relation to racist or religiously aggravated offences is in question, as racism complaints against British police over this last decade have also doubled. An *Independent on Sunday* investigation into complaints received by 20 police forces found that over 1,500 officers and civilians staff have been accused of racist behaviour overall, and that the annual total has risen from 74 in 2001-2001, to 167 in 2010-2011.<sup>47</sup>

This picture is corroborated by several independent surveys of Muslims relating to experiences of religiously-motivated discrimination and/or crime. A 2011 survey of British Muslims by the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) found that 74.5 per cent had “heard hostile remarks being made about Islam”; 64 per cent had been “stared at by strangers, many with worryingly high rates of frequency”; 63.1 per cent had “heard racial remarks”; 57.1 per cent had “heard or witnessed Islamophobic remarks”; 53.6 per cent had “experienced direct verbal attacks”; 50.9 per cent had “experienced unfriendly behaviour on the streets”; 41.9 per cent had “experienced being seen as unfit and unworthy”; and 41.4 per cent had “experienced threats or unfair accusation.”<sup>48</sup>

Unfortunately, much of such experiences remain unreported to authorities. According to the European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, between 53 and 98 per cent of Muslims who were victims of “in-person crime” did not report it to the police, and 79 per cent of respondents who reported experiencing religious discrimination did not report it to any competent organisation.<sup>49</sup>

Some of the most significant work on anti-Muslim hate crimes in the UK is by former Special Branch counter-terrorism officer Robert Lambert, who headed up Scotland Yard’s specialist Muslim Contact Unit, and his co-author political scientist Jonathan Githens-Mazer. In their first major report published by the University of Exeter, Lambert and Githens-Mazer document a dramatic increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes in London since 9/11 based on case studies and interviews with witness and victims of hate crimes, as well as police officers and former members of far right extremist groups involved in anti-Muslim campaigns such as the British National Party. They point out that the massive scale of hate crimes towards

Muslims in London is not being fully picked up by official police crime figures due to under-reporting of hate crimes by Muslims who have a distrust of police discrimination; as well as a police focus on racist hate crimes rather than specifically anti-Muslim offences, which they argue represent a distinctive form of racist crimes that have yet to be properly recognised as such. In particular, Lambert and Githens-Mazer point out that predominantly Islamophobic narratives in the British media have played a direct role in motivating perpetrators of anti-Muslim hate crimes:

**“The report provides prima facie and empirical evidence to demonstrate that assailants of Muslims are invariably motivated by a negative view of Muslims they have acquired from either mainstream or extremist nationalist reports or commentaries in the media...**

**Islamophobic, negative and unwarranted portrayals of Muslim London as Londonistan and Muslim Londoners as terrorists, sympathisers and subversives in sections of the media appear to provide the motivation for a significant number of anti-Muslim hate crimes...**

**An experienced BNP activist in London explains that he believes that most BNP supporters simply followed the lead set by their favourite tabloid commentators that they read every day. When these commentators singled out Muslims as threats to security and social cohesion, he says that it was perfectly natural for BNP supporters to adopt the same thinking...**

**[Thus] well-informed interviewees are clear that the main perpetrators of low-level anti-Muslim hate crimes are not gangs but rather simply individuals from a wide range of backgrounds who feel licensed to abuse, assault and intimidate Muslims in terms that mirror elements of mainstream media and political comment that became commonplace during the last decade.”<sup>50</sup>**

In their second report, they update this research with a UK-wide study, once again based on interviews across the country with members of Muslim communities who have experienced racist hate crimes, along with evidence from questionnaires sent to over a 1,000 mosques. Once again, Lambert and his co-author emphasise that the scale of anti-Muslim hate crimes, much of which are heavily under-reported, is far larger than conventionally captured in official statistics:

**“Since 9/11 arson, criminal damage, violence and intimidation against mosques, Islamic institutions and Muslim organisations has increased dramatically. Many mosques in isolated Muslim communities have become especially vulnerable...**

**Attacks include petrol bombs thrown into mosques, serious physical assaults on imams and staff, bricks thrown through mosque windows, pigs heads being fixed prominently to mosque entrances and minarets, death threats, other threatening and abusive messages – sometimes verbal sometimes written – and vandalism.”<sup>51</sup>**

They offer a conservative preliminary estimate of between 100 and 200 hate crimes a year against mosques, Islamic institutions and Muslim organisations since 9/11; and also note that many cases are not reported to police for fear of attracting further unwanted attention. Other reasons that such crimes do not enter official statistics is due to deficiencies with police procedures and categorisation of racist and religiously-aggravated crimes – for perpetrators of anti-Muslim hate crimes may not necessarily resort to specific mentions of ‘Islam’, as opposed to simply identifying their Muslim victims as terrorists or extremists. Lambert and Githens-Mazer thus go on to document “a disturbing number of reported and unreported hate crimes in which Muslim women wearing hijabs, niqabs or burkas have been assaulted, abused, and intimidated”, invariably in public spaces, namely “streets, shopping centres, on trains and on buses... Attackers are often described as abusing their victims as ‘terrorists’ or being in some way connected to terrorism or connected to ‘the Taliban’.”<sup>52</sup>

Hence, while racist violence against minorities in general remains a concern, “many Muslims face a greater cumulative threat of street violence than members of other minority communities and other fellow citizens.” Lambert and his co-author therefore underscore “the increased risk of violence and intimidation faced by Muslims in parts of the UK when compared with that faced by fellow citizens and neighbours who face the same threats of random violence... Muslims are singled out for attack because their attackers can generally identify their victims as Muslims because of their appearance or because, for instance, they can be targeted when leaving a local mosque.”<sup>53</sup>

Once again, in explaining this, they return to the fundamental role of the British media in promulgating stereotypical negative associations with Muslims which vindicate the racist sentiments of even far right extremists involved in organised intimidation and harassment of Muslims in the UK:

**“Most significant was a majority of mainstream UK political and UK media analysis and reporting that identified the suicide bombers’ motivation as being grounded in Islam or a particular rendition of Islam... Victims, witness and investigators have explained how this view of Muslims as terrorists or in some broadly conceived way as being pejoratively connected to terrorism has been at the heart of an alarming rise in what can best be described as anti-Muslim hate crime.**

**... in sections of the mainstream media and sections of the political elite consistently negative portrayals of Muslims in general and the stigmatisation of politically active Muslims as extremist and subversive has created a climate in which intimidation and violence against Muslims has become warranted and routine...**

**Our evidence suggests, Muslims are attacked on a regular basis because their attackers believe what has become common coinage in the media as well as in the BNP and EDL: that some or all Muslims are terrorists, terrorist sympathisers, extremists or subversives.”<sup>54</sup>**

## Conclusions & Recommendations

This analysis demonstrates that there is a serious and systemic problem of racist, anti-Muslim reporting within sections of the British media. While tabloid newspapers in particular bear direct responsibility for repeatedly inaccurate and racist reporting about Islam and Muslims, the impotence of the existing regulatory framework along with the general paucity of positive reporting on Muslims has unwittingly enabled the overall predominance of Islamophobic discourses.

Not only has this problem become increasingly entrenched over the last decade, it is reasonable to conclude based on the evidence from opinion polls and surveys that an intensifying social polarisation in this country between some Muslim and non-Muslim Britons is a direct consequence of the predominance of anti-Muslim media discourses. Specifically, hostility and suspicion toward British Muslims has become increasingly widespread and normalised amongst a majority of the general British population. Rather than this merely constituting a simple societal reflex to particular terrorist attacks undertaken by a tiny minority of Islamist militants, this growing suspicion and hostility should be recognised as a societal reading of inaccurate and derogatory representations about these and related incidents within powerful sectors of the British media, which tend to cast Muslims in Britain in their entirety under a generic shadow of demeaning labels linked to violence, extremism, and terrorism.

This entrenchment of Islamophobic sentiment is also directly linked to the emergence and acceleration after 9/11 of a distinctive form of racist violence targeted at Muslims. Not only have anti-Muslim sentiments become more widely dispersed as a result of a pattern of inaccurate, derogatory and racist reporting on Islam and Muslims within key sectors of the British media, the specific media narratives these sentiments originate from are directly used to motivate and mobilise anti-Muslim hate crimes. Indeed, far right extremist groups implicated in organised hate crime campaigns against Muslim communities in the UK routinely draw on sensationalist and inaccurate media reporting to legitimise their criminal activities on the basis that they are, as per predominant media discourses, targeting extremists and terrorists who are inherently opposed to British values and national identity.

It is therefore imperative that appropriate measures are explored to ensure that the British media is better informed, and better regulated, in its reporting on issues relating to race, and specifically in relation to Islam and Muslims. Our consultants to this project offered a wide range of informed recommendations for reform which we outline below.

The need and urgency of reform has been amply summarised by **Daanish Masood, UN Alliance of Civilizations Media & Partnerships Officer**:

***“The existing regulatory framework in the UK under the Press Complaints Commission has proven ineffective in addressing this issue. Crucially, this does not mean that freedom of speech should be curtailed, or that British media institutions should face any form of government censorship. On the contrary, the media must remain free to report on controversial issues, including issues facing Muslim communities. But there is a need***

***for accountability when the media fails to adhere to journalistic standards of accuracy and fairness. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that the Leveson Inquiry explore concrete ways to balance the need for freedom of speech, a fundamental right, with the need to ensure that false and potentially racist, anti-Muslim narratives are not promoted by elements of the British media due to poor journalism.”***

## **Regulation and the Press Complaints Commission (PCC)**

The existing system of regulation has failed, and requires urgent reform.

As former Channel 4 and ITN Programme Editor Charlie Beckett notes, the reason that certain sectors of the British press have conducted inaccurate anti-Muslim reporting is ***“because there has been a regulatory failure by the PCC, combined with cowardice of politicians and other media groups to condemn the practices.”***

Better and more robust regulation need not undermine the necessity to protect freedom of speech and to avoid censorship. A hallmark of the British media is undoubtedly its freedom to investigate and report on controversial matters without fear of unwarranted reprisals or sanctions. However, freedom of speech cannot in anyway be used to justify the promulgation of false, inaccurate and racist narratives on British Muslims which serve to demonise and criminalise them as a social group.

Tehmina Kazi, Director of British Muslims for Secular Democracy, points out that:

***“It is important to clarify that freedom of speech does not include the freedom to gratuitously offend and insult groups that fall within the remit of existing equalities legislation. This is particularly pertinent when such actions threaten to undermine a more pressing objective: the need to fully integrate Muslims into British society.”***

This is seconded by journalist Richard Peppiatt:

***“I completely accept people’s right to have and state their opinion freely. But then there’s corporate free speech, where we find that certain entities, including news corporations, are trying to make money by exploiting free speech as a business and an instrument of commerce... There is a complete difference between the right of every person to express their opinions, and the corporate act of publishing those views as fact. So, for instance, there’s a difference between a newspaper publishing a comment piece by a journalist or commentator expressing their opinion that Muslims are a problem or an issue. That would be an opinion piece, and one should be allowed to freely express their opinion in such a piece. That’s allowed. However, we have a situation in the press right now where fact is fused with comment, due to the framing of stories that I just described. Comment and interpretation is presented as news – facts are not simply reported, they are framed, and effectively what is delivered as ‘news’ is actually the consumer being told how to interpret facts. Or otherwise, certain facts are focused on while other facts are ignored to force an interpretation of the facts which is then presented as ‘news’. This should not be misconstrued as free speech, because this is quite deliberate misinterpretation and manipulation of facts to produce stories that will***

***sell. This is nothing less than propaganda. We need to step back and ask what we actually mean by free speech. Do we want a situation where news corporations can publish literally anything as news, no matter how untrue? There is no easy answer, but there must be a balance."***

What kind of regulation is needed to ensure that the media does not end up indulging in what effectively amounts to racist propaganda? It is now increasingly recognised that while some progress with the PCC has been made, much further reform is needed.

As **Guy Black, Executive Director of the Telegraph Media Group**, told us:

***"All publications should ensure they report accurately and allow opportunity to comment... There can never be an excuse of inaccurate or false reporting, and I hope that where this occurs, it is taken up with the PCC if any publication refuses to correct the record... I know that the PCC has made some progress in tackling inaccurate reporting on the back of positive dialogue with Muslim community groups. A successor body to the PCC is likely to be established in the relatively near future, and I hope - and would expect - that this constructive progress could continue."***

1. A key problem that has been identified with the PCC is that the code of conduct applies only to individuals who have been reported about inaccurately, with a resulting inability to launch third party complaints.

**Yasir Mirza of Guardian Media & News** observed:

***"The up and coming replacement for the PCC could be empowered to address the representation of communities and other groups as well as individual complaints. I think currently the main problem appears to be that if a comment is aimed generally rather than at a specific named person or group then the PCC cannot engage with it."***

Therefore the code of conduct must be amended to address discrimination against groups through false and inaccurate reporting, rather than just individuals.

2. Another key problem identified is that the PCC is simply not sufficiently independent from the media industry, and furthermore has no powers to impose meaningful sanctions or penalties capable of holding the media accountable for flagrant violations of the code.

**Former Independent on Sunday Deputy Editor Brian Cathcart** observed that:

***"I am convinced of the need for a new regulatory regime which is independent of the press (and of government) but which has the authority to compel membership and, where necessary, impose sanctions. I believe this is most likely to be achieved through legislation, providing what is called 'statutory underpinning' for the arrangement. Some in the press use the phrase 'statutory regulation' as a shorthand for government censorship. This is extremely misleading: regulation which is supported by statute can come in many, many forms and we are surely capable of designing one which protects free expression while also upholding standards. Hitherto the job has been left***



***exclusively to the industry and that industry has betrayed our trust. The Leveson Inquiry is probably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get these things right. If regulation is effective, it can remove the need for further legislation, or indeed for people to go to court.”***

Thus, several consultants pointed out that a new regulatory framework must not only be independent from government and the press, but should include proper penalties, including fines, as well as a statutory right of reply which gives due prominence to retractions and corrections in the form of equal space.

**Three Faiths Forum Director Stephen Shashoua** advised:

***“We do need an independent media watchdog and not just an institute that deals with complaints only (like the PCC for example) but something that can pay attention to what is being printed and enables people to decipher what is agenda driven and what are genuine issues.”***

According to **Journalism Professor Julian Petley**:

***“The only answer to this is a press code of practice which is properly enforced and infringements of which are met with meaningful sanctions. Third party complaints must also be entertained. But the real answer to all of these problems (which go beyond the misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam) is a statutory right of reply to articles which are factually inaccurate. Such replies should be published swiftly, and given the same prominence as the offending article. The press habitually rejects this idea by claiming that papers would be full of replies, but this is simply to offer an enormous hostage to fortune, since it is to admit that papers are indeed full of inaccurate articles! The existence of a meaningful right to reply would mean that papers would be much more careful to ascertain the truth and accuracy of stories before they published them, and it would also greatly help those journalists who are pressured by their editors to run stories which they know to be untrue or distorted (see Richard Peppiatt's evidence to Leveson). The PCC must be replaced by a body which is independent of both the press and government, but it must possess statutory back-stop powers so that it can impose meaningful sanctions on code breakers when all else fails.”***

Former television editor and **LSE journalism scholar Charlie Beckett** seconds this perspective:

***“We need a much tougher regulatory regime that pursues inaccuracies and misrepresentations with real punishments such as full apologies and fines and a right to reply.”*** This should not encroach on the right to publish ***“views critical of Muslim or Islamic groups/individuals (with the usual caveats about incitement etc).”***

3. The existing press code of conduct also needs to be revised in light of the extent to which social groups such as Muslims have been subjected to vilification and racist attacks due to irresponsible and inaccurate reporting, in order to ensure that the media acts in accordance with the protections afforded under existing equalities legislation.

Community leader Tehmina Kazi, for instance, recommends that:

***“The Equality and Human Rights Commission and Department for Communities and Local Government should draft a code of conduct relating to coverage on Muslim stories, with enforcement mechanisms (including fines) for persistent and unrepentant violations.”***

## ***Under-Representation of Minorities and Muslims in the Media***

The scarcity of minorities in general and Muslims in particular in the media in terms of employment is a fundamental structural problem that has contributed to the capacity of sectors of the British media to report inaccurately on Muslims with a degree of impunity.

4. Robust measures must be pursued, backed with regulatory enforcement, to ensure that the British media as a whole pursue new policies of positive action to increase employment of minorities, including Muslims, with clear targets.

Jason Beattie of *The Daily Mirror* remarked to us that:

***“A couple of years ago I gave a speech on this issue in which I pointed out that one of the reasons was there were far too few Muslim journalists on the local and national press. I suggested this... was a missed opportunity for the newspapers as they were, potentially, missing out on a wealth of news stories. I also pointed out that newsrooms remain predominantly white, middle class places of work and, even putting aside the nature of the work, as a result many journalists had little personal contact with Muslims or knowledge of Islam.”***

Journalism Professor Brian Cathcart similarly highlights an ***“undeniable failure of these papers to recruit newsrooms that reflect the society they serve. London is almost 30 per cent non-white: all of these papers are based in London yet I think it is a safe bet that none is even 10 per cent non-white. If more journalists working in those newsrooms were Muslim, and if reporters looked up from their screens and saw ordinary Muslim people who were colleagues, and could talk to them, they would be far less likely to make the misjudgements they do. This problem was documented by the Society of Editors in 2006, and identified then as a priority, but not nearly enough has changed.”***

This state of affairs will not change without pressure from government – therefore statutory reform is required to ensure that media institutions work towards ensuring that there is greater diversity in employment.

As Tehmina Kazi suggests: ***“... existing legislation should be better enforced, particularly the positive action provisions of the Equality Act 2010. News outlets should recruit more staff from Muslim backgrounds (but in a non-tokenistic manner), as well as more staff with a detailed knowledge of Islam and Muslim issues.”***

## **Formal Engagement with British Minorities and Muslim Communities**

Several consultants noted that the lack of engagement between British media institutions and Muslim communities was a major cause of editors' and journalists' lack of understanding of issues relating to minorities and Muslims. This can be addressed in a number of ways: better training and education of journalists; formal mechanisms to ensure that media institutions seek regular advice and input from independent experts on issues relating to Islam and Muslims; and this should include establishing forums by which editors and journalists are able to engage directly with British Muslim communities.

5. Journalists and editors reporting on issues relating to minorities such as Muslims require appropriate training and education to ensure they have a grounded and valid understanding of these issues in all their complexity and diversity. Given the scale of the problem, this training should be mandatory.

**Former BBC World TV editor Rita Payne** recommends that:

***“Training is essential so that all journalists aspire to the highest professional standards.”***

Stephen Shashoua, Director of the Three Faiths Forum, similarly suggests that:

***“Media personalities look for an exciting story and usually look for the fastest, easiest way to get that story. But at the same time the media must be informed in order to present informed writing. All this means that journalists should be getting much more intercultural training in order to fill this void in their knowledge and understanding of minority communities.”***

6. Any new or reformed regulatory framework should include the establishment of an independent advisory panel to provide expert input to journalists and editors on issues relating to minorities, including Islam and Muslims – perhaps by advising the PCC and/or its successor body.

**Christian Muslim Forum Director Julian Bond** recommends:

***“An appropriate level of responsibility is likely to be challenging for tabloid journalism. One possibility would be a Muslim advisor to the Press Complaints Commission and guidance on how to report ‘Muslim’ stories.”***

7. Forums should be established by which media institutions are able to engage directly with British Muslims in order to develop a better understanding of their culture and values.

**Ex-BBC journalist Rita Payne** stated:

***“Members of the community should try to set up regular exchanges with media owners and practitioners to promote understanding of their culture and values. Much of the negative reporting is the result of ignorance.”***

While some consultants suggested that the impetus for this should originate from British Muslim community leaders and organisations, it is clear that due to obvious power disparities, such outreach initiatives should be commenced by media institutions. However, equally, Muslim communities should certainly attempt to be more proactive in their efforts to engage media both critically and constructively.

As *The Mirror's* Jason Beattie told us, it is imperative ***“to find ways of promoting more Muslim journalists, building links between the media and Muslim organisations and working with Muslim organisations on how they can be better served by the media.”***

#### *Protection of Journalists*

8. Finally, there is a need to ensure that journalists themselves are protected so that they are able to exert their ethical rights to resist editorial pressure to report inaccurately or in a way that involves racist denigration – as has already been unanimously voted for by unions at a TUC conference last year.

**Journalism Professor Julian Petley** recommends: ***“... journalists should have conscience clauses in their contracts, and the right to full union recognition and representation in their workplaces.”***

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