Comparative Analysis of the Portrayal of Muslims in American and European News Media

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Abstract

Media representation is an important factor in determining public perception of marginalized groups. Within the last decade, Islam has become a polarizing subject frequently portrayed in western news and the discrimination against Muslims has emerged to the forefront of public dialogue. As such, it is worth examining how themes present in western news reflect a certain view of the Islamic faith. To this end, I conducted a content analysis of 20 online news articles, 10 from European news networks and 10 from American news networks, looking for similarities and discrepancies in the way these sources frame Muslim issues. While there exist a number of commonalities between American and European media in this capacity, comparing the two has revealed European media to generally be supportive of the European Muslim community, while American media takes a more cautious and less encouraging when discussing its Muslim population.

**Introduction**

Europe is currently experiencing a massive influx of refugees and asylum seekers from predominantly Muslim nations in the Middle East who are attempting to flee ongoing conflicts in their home countries (UN Refugee Agency 2015). This has led to escalating tensions between inhabitants of the Europe Union who view the large number of Muslim immigrants and the spread of Islamic influence as harmful to their way of life and the Muslim communities within these countries who feel threatened by the rise of anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic movements (Al Jazeera 2014). This phenomenon is not unique to Europe, however, as similar social shifts have occurred in the United States over the last decade, being perhaps most readily observable in the way American televised news has portrayed people of the Islamic faith in the years following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and, more recently, as American involvement in the Middle East has waned. Given this similarity, televised news can be used as a basis for analyzing the way Muslims are currently represented in Europe and how this compares to representations of Muslims in modern American media. These portrayals may be at least somewhat indicative of the relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim populations of the regions in question, and might therefore be used to determine a general public perception of Muslims in both Europe and America. Through a content analysis of current American and European television news that, I will examine how this media chooses to portray Muslims as well as the discrepancies and similarities that exist between the American and European representations.

**Literature Review**

Previous research concerning the construction of western perceptions of Islam shows a strong negative reaction towards Muslims in America and an increasingly prevalent sense of resentment towards Islam and multiculturalism in Europe (Lesinska 2014; Moosavi 2014; Selod 2014) . In the United States and Britain in particular this involves racialization, a process through which certain negative attributes ascribed to Islam, such as violent extremism or the oppression of women, are extrapolated onto the Muslim community as a whole (Moosavi 2014; Selod 2014). This process effectively “Others” the Muslim population, separating them from larger society (Selod 2014). This is explained further as Selod (2014) and Moosavi (2014), both utilizing an in-depth interview method, examine the loss of white privilege as a result of Islamic affiliation, where it is seen in the “de-Americanization” of Muslims in the United States and the re-racialization or “Pakistanization” of white Muslim converts in Britain. Both studies found that these groups are seen as traitorous to the nations in which they currently reside (and in the case of the British converts, are seen as traitors to their race) and lose the inclusiveness of being referred to as “American” or “British,” thereby subjecting them to castigation from larger, more dominant groups and barring them from ever fully integrating into communities that do not share a similar identity (Moosavi 2014; Selod 2014). Moosavi (2014) also notes the prevalence of the racialization of Muslims in other European countries, such as the racialization of Muslims in Germany as Turkish or in France as Maghrebian. In this way, Muslims throughout the United States and Europe are given a racial identity based on their faith that marks them as malignant and foreign entities (Moosavi 2014; Selod 2014).

In analyzing the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe and America, it is also worth looking at the symbolic representations of Islam in western media and how these reflect on the construction of a racialized Muslim identity. Byng’s (2010) analysis of American media explores of the roles Islamic symbols play in the United States, Britain, and France by discussing how vestments specific to the Muslim faith, such as the niqab, the hijab, and the burqa, and are tied to the “affirmation of [Muslim women’s] ethno-religious identity”(110) as well as being a means to “negotiate minority status” (110) in western nations. By targeting Islamic garb as an extension of racialized Muslim norms and values, western media affects change on the self-perception and society-wide opinion of Muslim women by identifying their religious clothing as socially unacceptable (Byng 2010; Moosavi 2014). In Selod’s (2014) in-depth interviews and Byng’s (2010) content analysis, both American and European conceptions about Muslims were constructed around media depictions of turbans, burqas, Qur’ans, and other objects that are symbolically Islamic as being antithetical to western values and culture.

Developing a necessary background to the reaction towards Muslims in the European Union requires examining the environment surrounding immigration in Europe and how this has affected local politics. Lesinska’s (2014) study of political backlash against immigration and multiculturalism found that worsening economic conditions coupled with recent security scares have contributed to the growth of conservative political movements in Europe. This exacerbates strain in an already tense atmosphere surrounding the influx of refugees to Europe, allowing for the popularization of anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic sentiment in mainstream politics (Lesinska 2014). Byng (2010) reports similar findings, noting the shift in the government policies of Britain and France surrounding Muslim attire from multiculturally-minded and nonintrusive to restrictive and wary. Lesinska (2014) also highlights the cyclical nature of European immigration, stating that periods of intense immigration that have occurred in the past were met with similar rises in anti-immigrant fringe groups.

In examining the societal perceptions of international immigrant populations, a number of studies have addressed the role media plays in shaping intolerance towards immigrants. These studies share a number of commonalities, namely that immigrants are, in most cases, portrayed as being an illegal or otherwise outright criminal element in society, are described using language and imagery evocative of enormous quantities (such as floods, swarms, or epidemics), and, and are presented in such a way as to appear culturally inferior to the host society. (Alvarez-Galvez 2014; Esses, Medianu, and Lawson 2013). Esses et al. (2013) and Alvarez-Galvez (2014) both make use of qualitative sampling methods in their studies, measuring the extent to which the consumption of different forms of media and particular attitudes towards immigrants are correlated. The nature of Alvarez-Galvez’s (2014) study leads to limited extrapolation from his data beyond correlations between certain types of media and attitudes towards immigration, while the research conducted by Esses et al. (2013) employs an amount of control over the variables of their qualitative work while also utilizing a method that allows for qualitative observations, producing a more comprehensive and firmly-grounded analysis of the effect of media on the dehumanization/”Othering” of immigrant groups.

**Methodology**

The way Islam is discussed in American and European media gives some insight into the relations between the Muslim communities and larger society of these regions, how the perception of Muslims has evolved in western media (if it has evolved at all), and how the representations of Muslims might be compared between the two locations. To this end, a content analysis of online articles from European and American news outlets that focus on events and issues relevant to Muslim lives and culture is ideal for distinguishing the overt, manifest messages intended to propagate certain views of the Muslim population as well as the more subtle, latent indicators of Islamophobic content hidden in the particular facets of Muslim representation.

I intend to review 10 online articles originating from American news networks and 10 online articles from European news networks that cover developments both positive and negative in the international Islamic community. The European media used in this analysis will be drawn from sources based in a number of different countries, but will be limited news networks that publish their online articles in English. I will be looking for articles that place an emphasis on Islamic cultural influence or reactions to instances of extremism, as the literature supports the notion that western conceptions of Islam are inextricably tied to the coverage of these topics. In these pieces, I will examine how these topics are addressed and whether the manifest and latent qualities of the articles are indicative of trends in how American and European media chooses to represent Muslims through the way they discuss Muslim issues. The trends found between the American and European news pieces will then be compared with the relevant literature to determine whether or not my findings agree with previous studies. Indicators will also be compared between American and European media to demonstrate similarities and disparities that exist between the two.

**Findings**

A variety of European sources were used in this analysis, with media being pulled from news networks based in Russia, France, Ireland, Germany, and the United Kingdom. A thematic analysis of both European and American online news articles pertaining to Islamic cultural influence or instances of extremism revealed four significant commonalities in the coverage of Muslim issues that were present both between the different forms of European media and between American and European media: (1) Islamophobia from a Muslim perspective, (2) the growth of the Islamic religion, (3) the assimilation of Islam into western culture, (4) and moderate Islam and Islamic extremism as two dissociated entities.

*Islamophobia from a Muslim Perspective*

Of the twenty articles analyzed, thirteen included first-hand accounts of Islamophobia as they were experienced by western Muslim citizens. In most instances, these accounts are used to shed light on specific abusive acts against Muslims, and distance the interviewees from Muslim extremism while also making it clear that radical Islamists do not constitute a significant part of the Muslim population.

In Russia Today’s *Muslims in Fear* and *UK Divided* articles, and NBC Chicago’s *Series of Hate Incidents Targeting Muslims in Chicago Area*, Muslim families recount the burning of mosques, assaults on young veiled women, and verbal threats that have contributed to a feeling of Islamic oppression in parts of America and Europe, a sentiment echoed by Muslims interviewed in Deutsche Welle’s *In France, Lessons in Secularism to Confront Radical Islam*. In these same articles, figureheads for local Islamic organizations and imams also state that the groups they represent do not condone or engage in violent extremism, again contributing to the idea that, because their communities are being held accountable for actions they did not commit or support, they are actively being oppressed on the basis of religious prejudices. In a similar fashion, all thirteen of the aforementioned articles relegate a portion of their pieces to denouncing anti-Islamic behavior by allowing victims to share their experiences and providing a public space for Muslims to personally dispel the apprehensions others in their communities might have towards them.

*Growth of the Islamic Religion*

Many of the articles also address the rapid growth of the Islamic religion, though a discrepancy exists between its coverage in European media and how it is discussed in American news**.** Growth of the Muslim population is referred to both in terms of the expected increase of Islamic faithful in the west and how this serves as a source of contention between Muslims and other elements in society.

While RTE One’s piece on Muslim Women and France 24’s article on the development of mosques in France make a point to note the high potential for growth in Europe’s Muslim population, *UK Divided* and the BBC’s *Growing Use of Sharia by UK Muslims* frame these projections and the growth in recent years as a source of tension between Muslims and European nationalist groups. Similarly, CNN’s piece on anti-Muslim bigotry and CBS’s coverage of the Chapel Hill shootings that claimed the lives of three Muslim university students address their respective issues in the context of growing Islamic affiliation in America. However, many of the American articles that discuss this growth also mention the increase in western Muslims since the 9/11 attacks, a historical perspective that the European sources lack and are, perhaps, incapable of producing analogues for.

*Assimilation of Islam into Western Culture*

Necessarily a product of the increasing popularity of Islam in the west is the assimilation of Islamic cultural practices into the functions of European and American culture. In the media, this is addressed in one of two ways depending on the source, with cultural cohesion being stressed in European news and cultural conflict being the emphasis of American news.

The cultural assimilation of Islam in way that strengthens communal bonds appears in a number of European articles, where it is referred to as an intermingling of different yet equally powerful cultural identities and a growing awareness of the compatibility of western ideas of civic responsibility and participation with Muslim religious doctrine. This is perhaps best exemplified by a statement made by the president of the French Muslim Council quoted in France 24’s article on mosque development: “Islam is no longer an Islam stemming from immigration, it is a national Islam that has a right to the recognition and consideration of the French Population…” The European sources portray their respective Muslim communities as groups that are autonomous enough to not have their cultural practices monitored because they were involved in and familiar with the political structure of European democracy.

In contrast, American sources chose to frame the process of assimilation as a dichotomy resulting in the conflict between two cultures. CNN’s *Time for an Honest Debate about Islam* cites events such as the Crusades and the emergence of the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda as examples of an ongoing cultural clash that has spanned centuries, while most other instances of the American media used in this study emphasized the divisions that exist between moderate Muslim communities and non-Muslim communities in the United States.

*Moderate Islam Separate from Islamic Extremism*

An incredibly prevalent theme throughout nearly all of the media in question is the distinction between the widespread moderate practice of Islam and incidents of violent extremism. Whereas the European media focuses more heavily on the prevention of Islamic extremism through the aforementioned political engagement, American media stresses the need to identify and exclude radical elements within the Muslim community European media frequently notes a salient difference between the majority of Europe’s Muslim population and radicals, and makes an effort to single out anti-Islamic groups as being fringe movements. European media also mentions the numerous initiatives and policies that are currently underway in many parts of Europe to more firmly integrate and protect Muslim communities that feel alienated or threatened, as is seen in the BBC’s *Are Most Terror Victims Muslim*.

American media places more of an onus on Muslim communities to actively ostracize extremists themselves in order to avoid culpability. This more reactionary approach to isolating extremists is seen in nearly all iterations of American news included in this study, but is especially conspicuous in Fox News’s article on terrorist recruitment where the responsibility for identifying radicals is placed explicitly and almost solely in the hands of American Muslims.

**Discussion**

The pervasiveness of the first-accounts of Islamophobia throughout the articles, both American and European, gives credence to the notion that discrimination against Muslims is a fairly widespread phenomenon rooted in a set of circumstances where both Muslim communities and non-Muslim communities feel threatened by the other group. This is further reinforced by the accounts themselves, many of which included Muslim families and local Muslim figureheads preemptively disassociating from violent radicals, conceivably in an attempt to circumvent the apprehensions of those in the non-Muslim community.

While it is talked about it less overtly xenophobic terms than in the literature, the discussion of growth in the Muslim population does agree some elements of Alvarez-Galvez’s study of media consumption and the perception of immigrants. In this study, Alvarez-Galvez (2014) found that media relating to immigrants produced in tumultuous times was likely to refer to foster resentment towards immigrants by referring to them as massive groups that were rapidly-expanding and were potentially invasive. With it is unclear whether the data presented in the media was intended to cultivate negative perceptions of immigrants in this way, it is still worth noting that many of the sources felt inclined to refer to the Muslim populations of Europe and America as incredibly large groups that were likely to continue growing.

The European and American takes on Islamic assimilation ring vaguely of Globalization and Hybridity Theory and Clash of Civilizations Theory respectively, each being concerned with the ways cultures interact on a global stage. Europe’s approach to intertwining concepts of democratic involvement and civic duty with Islam seems based in fundaments of Globalization and Hybridity Theory, as it encourages cultural mixing over separation focuses on the permeability of cultures between and within societies. Comparatively, American media places greater emphasis on the immutable differences between two cultures in conflict. Less conspicuously, this view of culture reflected in the American articles appears to be built around a nationalist understanding of non-western culture, as has been said of Clash of Civilizations Theory.

Having to continually separate violent extremists from the main body of practicing Muslims in Europe and America despite the public opposition to anti-Islamic movements addressed in many of the articles lends itself to the idea that more subtle displays of racism than outright violence continue to play a large role in establishing a western Muslim cultural identity. This connection is addressed by Byng (2010) in her article about negative attributes associated with being Muslim and Islamic symbolism and how these negative attributes inherently associated with the Islamic faith contribute to discriminatory practices against Muslims that are far less vitriolic than violent hate crimes but far more common. This sentiment is echoed by Selod (2014) who, in his study, states that having to constantly reaffirm the stance of the moderate Muslims in relation to extremism is also done to avoid more violent reprisals against Muslims who are mistakenly affiliated with radicals.

**Conclusion**

In analyzing how European and American media choose to frame their coverage of Muslims, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims can examined along the parameters outlined by reoccurring themes in western representation of Islam. These themes include viewing Islamophobia from a Muslim perspective as means to discourage prejudice, reminders of the growth expected from the Islamic religion in the west, the different methods for navigating cultural differences between Islamic ideals and western ideals, and the apparent necessity of regularly disassociating the mainstream practice of Islam from aggressive fundamentalism. In the interest of brevity and time, my sample size was greatly reduced, resulting in an analysis that is difficult to extrapolate from. Should any of my peers choose to conduct a similar study in the future, I imagine they would find it beneficial to expand the sample size and to devote more time to coding a more comprehensive set of commonalities between the two sources of media rather than focusing on comparative aspect of the study.

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