

## **Abstract**

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study on international Muslim students' perceptions of media portraits of Islam. 18 students were interviewed; they came from a range of countries so that a diversity of opinion could be gathered. The paper reveals that participants perceived the representation of Islam in the British media to be negative, being associated with conservatism, economic backwardness and terrorism. Participants criticised the media's tendency towards the homogenisation of Muslims and of Muslim countries. They also called on media organisations to balance the negative portrait of Islam with positive news stories and to be more responsible in their reporting of terrorism. Interestingly, their direct consumption of UK media was limited, pointing to the possibility that their views were either 'discursively' driven or were the product of 'passive media consumption'.

## **Key words**

Media Islam Islamophobia Muslim students

## Introduction

Global competition for the recruitment of international students is increasing as international education has become a major export industry at the university level, generating foreign exchange and economic benefits for universities and receiving destinations<sup>i</sup>. In the UK context, the Higher Education Statistics Agency<sup>ii</sup> estimated that there were 405,800 international students registered in British Higher Education in 2009/2010, making up approximately 16% of the total UK student population. In recognition of the importance of this income source, institutions are increasingly seeking to understand the issues facing international students in a bid to improve their product<sup>iii</sup>. Research into the international student experience has, therefore, steadily grown, focusing on adjustment to the new society and to the new academic culture<sup>iv</sup>.

Among the issues faced by international students in a new culture are racism and religious intolerance. Research has found that international Muslim students in particular experienced verbal and physical abuse whilst studying in England<sup>v</sup>. Further, there is dissatisfaction with the way the British news media misrepresented Islam, which was seen to fuel prejudice<sup>vi</sup>. The findings presented in this paper derive from a research project that aimed to explicitly explore international Muslim student perceptions of media representations of Islam. Little previous research has been done on the topic, and none from the sojourner perspective.

The international sojourn is defined as a temporary between-culture stay<sup>vii</sup>. While there is some debate about the extent and directness of 'media effects' upon audiences, it is widely believed amongst media scholars that the media are powerful influences on public attitudes

and behaviour<sup>viii</sup> as well as on the well-being of those targeted by negative media messages<sup>ix</sup>.

The authors believe that sojourners' experiences of the media-saturated environment in the country they are visiting is an important research topic.

## **Literature review**

The quite extensive literature on the treatment of Muslims in the media reveals a widespread assumption that the British media are Islamophobic. Many sources appear to confirm this, and indeed there is substantial evidence that Islam and Muslims are negatively represented in much media content. Opinion outside of academia often reflects this. According to the Cross-government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hatred, constant negative media coverage on Islam is shaping people's views. In a report submitted to the Leveson inquiry into press standards in 2012, the group stated that there was "a serious and systemic problem of racist, anti-Muslim reporting within sections of the British media"<sup>x</sup>.

However, in a review of the literature on the UK media, the position was found to be more complex than some assume<sup>xi</sup>. There are empirical and conceptual shortcomings in a number of the relevant reports, and evidence for comprehensive and deliberate Islamophobia is lacking. However there is a strong tendency to homogenise Islam, in particular a failure to differentiate consistently between violent Islamism and mainstream Islam. There is also the inevitable juxtaposition of words and images denoting Islam in news items about terrorism, war and oppressive fundamentalism.

Overall the portrayal of Islam(s) and Muslims in the media is complex and at times contradictory. However whatever the actual nature of media content, how that content is experienced by Muslims will have consequences, for their sense of security as individuals, and for relations between Muslim sojourners and groups in the host community. In this paper our concern is with *perceptions* of media content. There has been little research on how Muslims in Britain perceive British media content relating to Islam.

Ahmad<sup>xii</sup> conducted interviews or email exchanges with seventeen Muslim professionals aged from early 20s to 50s, six of whom worked in media, about their assessment of media coverage post-9/11. They were unanimous in their cynicism about mainstream media, and in their conviction that the media are Islamophobic. Her sample was gathered through personal networks, and so may possibly have been skewed ideologically, since the researcher was involved in the Muslim Public Affairs Committee and the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism.

Ahmad's data includes some examples of the convoluted reasoning that can be found in the academic literature on Islamophobia, where it can be seen to accompany and support the certainty that the media are heavily anti-Islamic. One participant asserts that 'only Muslim countries [are] in the "Axis of Evil", and deals with the fact that the idea of such an axis included North Korea by claiming that this is a 'red herring', presumably to divert attention from the essentially anti-Islamic nature of this rhetoric of evil (p.975). This is followed by the statement that as most people now see Islam as equated with terror, it doesn't matter whether media say 'Muslim' or just 'terrorist'. Either way there will be negative associations with Islam. When audience readings are seen as wholly predetermined in this way, the critique of

the media almost disappears into itself, as there is no way out of 'Islamophobia' for the media if these connections now unavoidable.

Brown<sup>xiii</sup> conducted a qualitative study involving interviews with Muslim international students whose focus was on how Islam was a uniting force for students far away from home. It also offered a route to finding comfort and safety among others who were experiencing verbal and physical assault deriving from their status as Muslims. The students interviewed blamed their mistreatment on the confusion on the part of the non-Muslim community between Islam and terrorism, which many said was encouraged in media reports. The author noted that this view receives prestigious support from, e.g., the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance<sup>xiv</sup>, which advises that care is taken in how Islam is portrayed in the media in order that bigotry and intolerance are not encouraged.

Ryan<sup>xv</sup> studied a sample of thirty-one Muslim women in North London and their experiences of stigmatisation. Her focus was not specifically on their perceptions of media coverage, but she reports a number of spontaneous observations by her interviewees expressing their fear that (what they believed to be) highly negative coverage of Islam in the media could produce a backlash against Islam. One of her respondents suggested that the avowed religious identity of violent extremists should not be mentioned in media reports. This is an understandable reaction, but is a demand which the media could not meet, given the explicit self-descriptions of Islamist terrorists and the rationales offered for jihadism by its supporters. It is comparable, we might suggest, to asking for coverage of Northern Ireland which does not mention religion. This is not to say that constant vigilance and sensitivity should not be asked of reporters and editors in their choice of words and images in covering Islamist terrorism,

which returns us to the importance of emphasising the profound variation within religious traditions, and of distinguishing fanaticisms from humane values within each religion.

Sympathy for this view is echoed by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance<sup>xvi</sup> which advises that care should be taken in how Islam is portrayed in the media in order that bigotry and intolerance are not encouraged. According to the Cross-government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hatred, constant negative media coverage on Islam is shaping people's views. In a report submitted to the Leveson inquiry into press standards in 2012, the group stated that there was "a serious and systemic problem of racist, anti-Muslim reporting within sections of the British media"<sup>xvii</sup>.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative approach to collecting data was chosen as the most appropriate way to access participants' thoughts and feelings about media representations of Islam. It is also the approach most suited to exploratory research<sup>xviii</sup>. A semi-structured interview design was chosen because there were a small number of questions that the researchers wished to cover. A list of topics was created but the interview approach was flexible, so that issues of interest to participants could be pursued<sup>xix</sup>. Whilst the topics indicated below were discussed with each participant, responses inevitably varied, as did the length of time spent discussing each topic. The interview guide was designed to include the following: participants' main medium for getting the news; the source of the news they obtained; examples of media coverage of Islam; their views and feelings about news coverage of Islam and of their own country; how Islam is represented in any other media.

Purposive sampling was used, and inclusion criteria were as follows: participants had to be a university student, international and Muslim. Variation sampling was thereafter sought in terms of nationality so that a variety of perspectives could be obtained. It is understood that the Muslim world is not homogeneous, and that nationality could influence participant responses. The research setting was a university in the south of England whose international student population makes up 15% of the entire student body, reflecting the national average. Access to students was granted through the programme leaders of the three academic schools recruiting the highest number of international students. International Muslim students were identified, and each student received an individual email, asking them if they would be willing to take part in a one-to-one interview. In line with ethical guidelines, they were informed of the research aim: to identify international Muslim students' perceptions of the representations of Islam in the British media, and reassurances of confidentiality and anonymity were made.

Of 30 students contacted, 18 students agreed to participate in the project. Of these, two were PHD students, one was an undergraduate and 15 were Masters students; 9 were male and 9 were female. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 29; exceptionally one was 38 and one was 20. A range of nationalities is represented in the research: Turkey (2, one male and one female), Libya, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Syria (2, one male and one female), Egypt, Algeria, Kazakhstan, Jordan, Oman, Lebanon, Gambia, Sudan, Russia, Nigeria.

At the start of the interview, participants were informed again of the aim of the project and promises of confidentiality and anonymity were reiterated. Permission was obtained to record the interviews, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and which were conducted in the interviewer's office. Physical comfort can influence the quality of the data<sup>xx</sup>, thus a drink was

offered and comfortable seating was provided. It is recognised that for the participants, speaking in a foreign language could be tiring, thus breaks were offered too.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involves 3 steps: transcription, familiarisation and coding<sup>xxi</sup>. Firstly all interviews were fully transcribed, and transcripts were repeatedly read to get a sense of the whole. Finally each transcript was manually coded: phrases, sentences or paragraphs were highlighted and given a discrete label of concrete inference. Once the subject in the text changed, a new label was given to the next phrase, sentence or paragraph. At the end of coding, the mass of codes that are generated by thematic analysis were sorted into categories, whereby codes of similar meaning are grouped together<sup>xxii</sup>. As the main findings section of the paper show, three types of data were generated by this study are:

- 1, profiles of participants' media consumption.
2. their perceptions of media representations of Islam.
3. their views on the need to rebalance the negative portrait of Islam.

Qualitative researchers do not claim generalisability given their non-representative and usually small sample; however they can make claims of transferability whereby findings may be transferable to similar contexts to the research setting under study<sup>xxiii</sup>. The authors suggest that the opinions and experiences shared by participants in this study may be held by other members of the permanently settled and sojourning Muslim community in the UK.

## **Findings**

### **1. Profiles of media consumption**



All participants stated that whilst in the UK, they used the internet to access the news. The sites they used included BBC news online (all), their own national news online (all: e.g. Hurriyet, Vatan, Milliyetare, Sabah and Haber Turk and NTV for Turkey), Al Jazeera (8), the Independent (2) and the Guardian (1). The following comment was typical:

*Generally I read the news online everyday. I look at my own country news then I choose BBC news online because its news is current and consistently updated.* Turkish student

All students also used Facebook and Twitter for both social interaction purposes and for picking up news stories, either through friends' posts or through subscription to newspaper accounts through these fora.

*It is very effective for getting the last minute news from the world and my country.* Jordanian student

*You can follow the news on your mobile as well as on the laptop. It is never far away.* Syrian student

*I use twitter deliberately for the news because I think all important news is firstly written on twitter by certain writers which I follow.* Turkish student

*Facebook is the most powerful source in order to gain update news.* Iranian student

*Recently there was an election and twitter gave me the news very quickly.* Kuwaiti student

*On my face book it gives breaking news from the whole world. I have two different pages, one of an English and one of an Egyptian.* Egyptian student

Online interaction and discussion of the news were important, as mentioned by the Russian participant:

*I use social media to get the news, particularly Facebook. It has a lot of references to news in the world. It is important that you can monitor news and discuss it with other friends online.*

Such interaction is especially important for international students who seek comforting contact with family and friends at home, to offset the loneliness that commonly besets sojourners<sup>xxiv</sup>. Indeed, the increasing importance of technology and the contact it permits has been noted in research<sup>xxv</sup>.

Only a few participants spoke of reading a newspaper, and this only when they were working.

*I used to work in supermarket so used to read newspapers there.* Libyan student

*When I came to the UK I never buy newspapers; I read the BBC or my own national newspaper online everyday instead.* Turkish student

All students spoke of watching news programmes on TV occasionally but this was not their main source of news, and radio was not mentioned at all.

Interestingly, many students spoke of using different online sources of news in order to compare and verify the news stories they came across. This was seen as a vital way to establish the credibility of the news; there was a distrust of consuming only one source, as it was felt that all sources were bound to be influenced by the agenda of the owners or political system. This viewpoint is supported by Morey and Yaquin<sup>xxvi</sup>, who state that though there is

no conspiracy between politicians and the media to dictate how Muslims are represented, there is ‘a rather inadvertent complicity with power agendas’ (p. 77).

*I read and watch more than one media tool in order to be precise in the information I get and the opinions I form. Lebanese student*

*I use more than one media tool because sometimes each media tool publishes different content about the same issue. Omani student*

*I look at the official sources, newspapers, whatever but then I ask opinion of other people, from the teacher, anyone else that has life experience. If people only read one newspaper, for example, they see the situation from only one side. Kazak student*

*I follow everything, most of it is online, for example I read newspapers online and I follow social media, and I sometimes watch TV. Sometimes there is difference between news on BBC, Syrian news, Iranian news. There is also BBC and BBC Arabic. You have to analyse. I lived there and I live here now. I can analyse, what do people think here and what do they think there? I can build my opinion. In terms of newspapers I read the Guardian and the Independent. Every channel they create their page on facebook, and I look at that too. I read in English and in Arabic. Syrian student*

The above comments reflect a commitment to a plurality of perspectives that is quite sophisticated when one considers that these are not even media students. For the following student, distrust of the agenda of the news reporter meant that he tried where possible to access the original source rather than rely on the interpretation of the individual journalist:

*I always want to go to the source, the main source of where this news comes from. I rely on this. You can find anything on the internet.* Turkish student

The reason for consuming different media sources derived from students' conviction that media messages are shaped by a country's prevailing political system.

*They have some agenda, yeah, and they try to deliver their own vision.* Libyan student  
*Political decisions can affect newspapers or the media; these can be projected by the government.* Kazak student

*Each media source is influenced by politics.* Syrian student

*I think Muslims are presented in the negative way because powerful countries want it that way. The first reason might be, in these days Arabic countries have petrol or underground sources which powerful countries need. That's why powerful countries need excuse to conquer or embrace these countries. That's why they need to show some problems. It is not true news but it is about what their plan is, they can't be trusted!* Iranian student

Students did not state that this commitment to accessing a diverse range of sources was practised at home. It is possible therefore that it is a product of the move to a new culture, which perhaps generated feelings of mistrust, and led some sojourners to act with a suspicion similar to that with which they felt they were greeted by the host community.

## **2. Representations of Islam in the news**

In our students' perceptions of media representations of Islam, three themes emerge:

- a. Muslims are shown to be terrorists;
- b. Muslim countries are shown to be strict and conservative in terms of religion;
- c. They are shown to be dirty, backward and uneducated.

These views are encapsulated in the following comments:

*If you ask any English person, 'tell me ten words about Islam', most of them will say bombs, terrorists, all because they hear, they see all this extreme news on TV and on internet. They will say we are poor and ignorant and very strict in religion. Algerian student*

*It began in September 2001. From then Islam was an enemy for the whole world. All you see are wars, poverty and terrorism so you don't have any chance to think that it is good. We have a certain image of Islamic people in our heads, they must be poor, they must be terrorist, they must be very strict, all negative stuff. Kazak student*

*I think all Muslim countries are presented as underdeveloped, uneducated and dangerous. Maybe some of them are like that but not all of them. Omani student*

Though students were asked to specify news stories that had struck them either positively or negatively, very few could recall specific coverage.

- a. Mentioned by all students was the link made by the media between Islam and terrorism.

*Because of constant negative media coverage all over the world of terroristic attacks, most of people perceived Muslims as cruel, criminal and dangerous people. It causes Islamophobia. You should watch the film, 'My name is Khan and I'm not a terrorist'. Film shows how*

*misunderstanding of people about Muslim people can cause dramatic consequences.* Russian student

*They're destroying the picture, the idea of Islam. I watch the news and I think 'oh my god, this is wrong, they are destroying us. Muslims are terrorist.' It upsets me, you know. I had no idea it was like this. When I came to England, I was so depressed, it shocked me that Islam is seen as a terrorist, bad religion, encouraging people to bomb and kill and I don't know what. We don't see any good picture about Islam. Everyone thinks it's about bombing and killing.*

Libyan student

One might wonder why this was student shocked: a recent study<sup>xxvii</sup> revealed a high level of trepidation among Turkish students about travelling to the West because they perceived western countries to be anti-Muslim; students prepared for negative stereotypes in advance of their trip.

*I think some people have a phobia because of 9/11 and other things that have happened, and you can't really blame them because that's how the media shows it to them.* Syrian student  
*Actually, I haven't heard positive news about Islam and Muslim people when I was in UK. Especially, after twin towers assassination attempt, European and American people have so much prejudice to Muslim people. They think that all Muslim people are terrorist. That they will do anything to spread their religion or power.* Lebanese student

*Actually, it was very disturbing to find that people we lived together with in the UK had some prejudices about Muslims and Islamic countries because of the negative effects of the media. But I think it is very normal to have prejudice against Muslims if you don't know any Muslim personally because Muslims who took place in the news were extremists.* Turkish student

Specific news stories were commented on by two students:

*It was not so hard to notice some negative news about Islam and Islamic countries. Terrorism and extreme Islamic protests in the UK are the most common stories. I remember a protest in London by the supporters of Bin Laden. They staged a mock funeral for him in front of the US Embassy. I thought these guys were misrepresenting all the Muslim community as the supporters of Bin Laden. Then, of course it is normal to think that we are potential terrorists. However, British media also took advantage of these extreme protests for making some deceit news about Islam. One of the writers of Daily Star was fired because of showing Muslims as dangerous and bad people.* Turkish student

*I remember the case of expulsion of some Islamic scholars from the UK. When a British politician was being interviewed on the BBC, there was a photo the whole time in the background of a mosque, it was a photo, not live. So the mosque was linked in the mind with terrorism. Is this responsible reporting?!* Nigerian student

The above student points to a link made by the media between Islam and terrorism, resentment over which echoes that documented in the domestic Muslim community over the portrait and treatment of Muslims and a seemingly blanket association between Islam and terrorism (see Baines et al.<sup>xxviii</sup>). The mosque may have been one attended by the extremists in question, so there may have been a justification for using its image, but the student's point is pertinent. Interestingly, a similar criticism is made by Morey and Yaquin<sup>xxix</sup> who refer to a BBC news report on an illegal immigrant producing ricin: the programme showed the image of a chemical lab followed by Muslims in a mosque praying.

Some students suggested that the media should detach the label Islamic from the reporting of terrorist incidents, a point echoed by Ryan<sup>xxx</sup>,

*Terrorists are sick people, the media are doing wrong things reporting them as religious.*

*Don't mention Islam, just treat them like they are sick or criminal.* Libyan student

*This is an extremist person and he's got a mental problem and he's committed a crime but he doesn't represent us. Let's deal with it as any normal crime. When people attack London, it is not Islam: don't relate it to any religion! Speak about him as a criminal not as a representative of our religion.* Egyptian student

*Remember that terrorist attack in Norway, he killed 100 people. If he was a Muslim it would have been an Islamic terrorist attack. But he was a Norwegian guy and European, and it was treated like an accident. I think that terrorism shouldn't be associated with Islam only.* Kazak student

b. Students also resented a blanket media portrait of Muslim countries as fundamentalist states.

*I think they show them as a kind of closed group, very very conservative, that they are so strict and religious people.* Syrian F

*I saw some coverage of Islam women by BBC Channel. They were shown as slaves who have no any rights, choice, uneducated and unsocial.* Russian student

*The media shows that men have slaves and women are held back and got no will, as if it was hundreds of years ago.* Saudi Arabian student



In particular, the female Syrian student described a bias in the images shown of the Arab summit in August 2011:

*We watched BBC and there was this conference that happened and the only shots they took were shots of a woman that was wearing a veil, she was completely covered and shots of a man with a beard and it was not just those kinds of people who were there and we noticed that when you watch BBC they only take those kind of shots.*

Students were keen to point out however that Muslim countries vary in how women are treated and how strictly Islam is followed. They concluded that the British media tend towards homogenisation, with the most conservative nations being shown to be representative. Indeed, Powers<sup>xxxii</sup> supports this view in claiming that the western media probably under-represent the diversity of opinions within Islamic countries, and under-report the strength of moderate opinions there. According to Morey and Yaquin (2011), Islam is often shown to be medieval, and inherently alien; images commonly include a bearded praying man, and a covered woman. Indeed, they note that the veil symbolises an unbridgeable divide between Islamic conservatism and Western progressivism, between the civilised self and an unenlightened Other.

c. Finally, Muslim countries tended in students' minds to be portrayed in the media as economically backward.

*Islam is behind the modernisation, is not a civilised community. People think we are behind the modern things, people think we use camels, that we live in the desert! Yeah, yeah! Can you believe it? Then when people visit me, they say, 'it is very civilised!'* Syrian student

Interestingly, the Egyptian student saw conflict in the simultaneous portrait of his country as an attractive tourist destination and a place of poverty and backwardness:

*Egypt is always shown to be poor, except in tourist brochures. It's a contradiction! For the tourist, it's fine, you can live well. But in other news, the media shows slums and poverty and dirt.*

Similarly the Saudi student felt that the media portrays her country as an undeveloped state:

*From the western media some people would think that we in Saudi Arabia still live in tents. They think that in Saudi we are developed little.*

It is understandable that participants react strongly against negative portraits of the state of their country's economy: a link between economic power and collective self-esteem has been noted in previous research into identity and culture contact<sup>xxxii</sup>. The above comments show that participants were keen to correct misrepresentations, thereby restoring collective self-esteem. Ward et al.<sup>xxxiii</sup> argue further that there is a tendency among sojourners to resist challenges to national identity owing to the temporary nature of their sojourn which allows them to retain a stronger identity with their culture of origin.

### **3. Rebalancing a negative portrait**

The power of the media to influence people's views and behaviour was underlined by all participants. This is reflected in the student comments below, which were echoed throughout the interviews:

*The media has lots of power to manipulate people, that is why media owners have to be very responsible.* Syrian student

*The media portrays the negative rather than the positive. This must be changed to get more balance.* Sudanese student

Students' fears are vindicated by Morey and Yaquin<sup>xxxiv</sup> who argue that suspicion and hostility towards Muslims have increased 'with the steady drip of negative media images' (p. 208). It is for this reason that most students suggested that the media should take responsibility for the effect of its coverage of Islam and of Muslims and right the negative image it projects.

*I don't find it wrong what they show. After all, that what's happening! But there are lots of positive things happening as well. And these should be shown too.* Gambian student

*We have lots of positives. All states and all people have their bad and good sides but the media only portrays the bad side. It should be rebalanced maybe; you have to balance the image.* Kazak student

*It's important to make people more aware of what Islam is and to show respect. There are 2.5million Muslims in Britain, so it's important that we understand more about Islam. A lot of people are doing good things; we have a lot of charity and a lot of people helping other people in Muslim countries. They are building schools and hospitals but they don't put that in the news. In the news there are only bad things.* Kuwaiti student

Specifically, a Turkish student spoke of what she saw as the good works of the Prime Minister that she felt went unreported:

*What I saw in the UK news, I couldn't see enough the Turkish Prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's operation for peace and to unite Islamic countries. They gave more place to Gaddafi's death and the commotion in Egypt.*

Echoing participants' sentiments, a report produced by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance<sup>xxxv</sup> cautions the media to improve its representations of minority groups in a bid to reduce hate crime and prejudice. At the highest level then, a link is drawn between media representations and attitudes and behaviour. As Morey and Yaquin<sup>xxxvi</sup> point out, repeated associations between Muslims and terrorism fuel racism and at the least they damage community relations as they play a key role in shaping attitudes and confirming prejudices about Muslims.

### **Explaining the perceptions**

There is a basic discrepancy in the data which needs to be examined. On the one hand the participants were unanimous in their views that the British media are infused with negative images of Islam. On the other hand, from the reports they give of the media which they consume, they are not extensively exposed to the British news media, apart from the BBC. Most prominent in their news media consumption profiles were BBC Online and social media. In particular they were not consumers of any national newspapers, except for the

participant who reported reading the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, and another who said that s/he used to read newspapers while working in a supermarket which stocked them. So their consumption of the British tabloids, where both anecdotal and systematic evidence tell us any anti-Islamic prejudices are most likely to be found, is very limited indeed, apparently nil in most cases. It is unlikely that the social media sites they would choose would be recycling tabloid content. Consistent with this feature of their media consumption profiles is the paucity of any specific examples given of anti-Islamic media content. This leads us to ask how and why they are of the view, typically quite emphatically so, that the British media are ‘Islamophobic’.

Two possible explanations for this discrepancy can be suggested. One is that this view is without foundation in their own direct experience (which, if true, would require a further question to be answered: why then do they hold it?). The other is that there are ways in which they might be exposed to media content ‘passively’, without themselves choosing to consume, or finding themselves consuming, the content of which they complain. We will consider these explanations in turn.

1. It is possible that our participants, and many other people including many non-Muslims, take it as given that the mainstream media in Britain (or indeed in any non-Muslim country) are predominantly anti-Islamic. They do not come across much material which challenges this assumption, partly because they are not heavy consumers of UK news media. Such an assumption could be a consequence of the experience of anti-Muslim attitudes outside of the media, the presence of which is then generalised to media content. The reasoning here would be on the lines of: ‘I find British society hostile to Islam, and believe that British media must be a part of that hostility.’ Some of our participants were indeed able to recount incidents of first-hand encounter with that hostility as they went about their business: many had

suffered verbal and even physical assault related to their faith. Or it could be an ideologically-driven assumption, whereby the belief about media content is required by the world-view that western media are steeped in xenophobic discourses which necessarily promote a negative view of Islam. Or, thirdly, it could be a case of received wisdom, a view that is repeated so often that many are ready to assume its truth – though that is likely to be linked to a receptivity to the ideological factor.

2. The second explanation involves a concept of passive media consumption, analogous to the concept of passive smoking. It could be argued that in a media-rich environment it is impossible to avoid the consumption of some media content, via television news screens in public places, radio and television news bulletins as background in work or social spaces, newspaper headlines and captions visible to passers-by on newsstands or on instore racks, the same viewed over the shoulders of fellow-passengers or people in queues. So although our participants did not choose to consume much content from British news media, they were exposed to it sufficiently to underpin their impressionistic but still empirically-based conclusions about Islamophobia in the media. This could also explain the lack of reported examples: one is perhaps less likely to be able to cite examples if all that one had seen or heard was a headline fragment, or decontextualised sentence or two of reportage. Passive media consumption is a plausible concept, and one which may have particular relevance for sojourners and recent migrants, whose early experience of the mediatised environment may be fragmented and impressionistic. However any assessment of its relevance to the data reported here, and to broader debates about media effects, must be speculative, as we are not aware of any research evidence that bears upon it, and it was not the object of this investigation.

Given the power of discourse over understanding and perception, it is perhaps most likely that the views of our participants are discursively driven. Some of them may have come to the UK with negative views of western media or with some apprehensions about how as Muslims they would be seen in a number of contexts. In the same way as western media probably under-report the strength of moderate opinions in Islamic countries, so some media in those countries may overstate the strength in western societies of anti-Islamic sentiment. Moreover once in the UK some of our participants report having encountered prejudice amongst the general public, supporting their negative or fearful apprehensions of the images they might find of themselves in the media here. Moreover, as noted, there is a substantial and vocal body of opinion within social science which supports the critical discourse of the media as Islamophobic, and as university students our participants were inhabiting a cultural setting in which this discourse has wide currency, even if they did not directly encounter any critical analyses of media content in their own studies.

Is it possible then that the views we have recorded were very largely based on preconception or imagination, rather than being simple reflections of their own direct experience? Our participants were, by definition, well-educated, and although we should not assume that this guarantees their capacity for rational evaluation, we might still hope that it would moderate whatever prejudices they might have been exposed to. Perhaps the explanation lies somewhere in between the empirical and ideological.

## **Conclusion**

This study reveals that international Muslim students perceived the representation of Islam in the British media to be negative, being associated with conservatism, poverty and terrorism. This had an impact on students who were saddened and sometimes angered by what they perceived to be a distorted image of their faith. They saw little effort on the part of the media to balance the negative portrait of Islam that they help to build, and called upon media organisations to resist stereotyping and to be more responsible in their reporting.

While the basis for such perceptions in the content of some UK media has to be acknowledged, it was not clear that our participants had enough direct experience of the media on which to base their views. Possible reasons for this anomaly have been examined.

This paper has focused on sojourner perceptions of media representations of Islam. Further research could usefully target permanent residents of the domestic Muslim population who it can be argued are more affected by media (mis)representations of their faith than those whose stay is temporary. In addition, though, and more generally, the impact of media discourse on migrants in increasingly mediatised societies is a potentially important research area, investigation of which may help to illuminate the complex dynamics of adjustment and of relations between migrants and previously resident groups.

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<sup>i</sup> Marginson, S., C. Nyland, E. Sawir, and H. Forbes-Mewett.. *International student security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2010

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