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Media coverage of Muslims: Introduction and overview

Erik Bleich

A. Maurits van der Veen

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Introduction and overview

> *Just once I want CNN to be like, "Now we are going to Mohammed in*
> *Iran." They go to some guy who's like, "Hello, I am Mohammed and I'm*
> *just baking a cookie. I swear to God. No bombs, no flags, nothing. Back*
> *to you, Bob." That would be the whole news piece. They're never going*
> *to do that. Even if they ever did that, they would follow it up with an-*
> *other news piece. This just in: A cookie bomb just exploded.*
> —Maz Jobrani, *The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*[1]

Muslims have long been a stigmatized group in the United States. One of the
earliest articles mentioning Muslims in the *New York Times*, for example, was
an 1858 story headlined "Another Mussulman Outrage in Syria." It described
the murder of "an English lady of extreme benevolence" by two men heard
"cursing the Christians, and threatening death to anyone whom Allah threw
in their way."[2] This thread of suspicion is hardly a historical artifact. In the
contemporary era, even prior to the 9/11 attacks, Muslims were frequently
mentioned in connection with controversial topics like the Nation of Islam,
"Black Muslim" criminality, and foreign conflict zones like Iran, Lebanon,
Afghanistan, and Iraq. In the living memory of most Americans, Muslims
and Islam have regularly been associated with both internal and external
threats.

American Muslims understand this. They overwhelmingly and accurately
believe that they face significant discrimination, and that most Americans
do not see Islam as fully belonging in the United States. A 2017 survey re-
vealed that 50% of all US respondents feel Islam is not part of mainstream

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[1] YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=718bxd8ojBY, 1:48–2:12, accessed August 1, 2020.
[2] *New York Times*, November 1, 1858.

American society, that over 40% think there is a "natural conflict" between Islam and democracy, and that Islam encourages violence more than other faiths (Pew Research Center and Lipka 2017). This skepticism and outright hostility translate into concrete effects. The New America think tank and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) have documented a wide variety of anti-Muslim activities in the United States, including vandalism against mosques, anti-Muslim statements by politicians and public figures, proposals for "anti-sharia" legislation, and verbal and physical assaults against Muslim Americans (New America, n.d.; CAIR, n.d.).

Scholars, too, argue that Muslims are an especially demonized outgroup in the United States. Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner (2009, 2), for example, explain that Americans view Muslims not only as religious minorities, but also as cultural minorities "defined by behaviors or values that many find unusual or offensive." For Lajevardi (2020, 12), Muslim Americans are often viewed not just as a religious group, but also as a racialized one for whom "external markers such as dress, skin color, accent, and language" identify them to some as "a threat to American culture and national security." And Oskooii, Dana, and Barreto (2019, 4) argue that "unfavorable views toward Muslim Americans" are rooted partly in the "specific characterization of Muslims and Arabs as culturally inferior, opposed to democratic norms, and a rising challenge to the modern Christian world." Such suspicions affect not only Muslims within the United States, but also those wanting to come to the country. Comparing American respondents' willingness to have their country grant citizenship to legal immigrants who are Christian or Muslim, Creighton and Jamal (2015, 90) show that Muslims are an "outgroup subject to distinct intolerance."

Intensely negative attitudes toward Muslim immigrants and their descendants also exist outside of the United States. In the European context, for example, Zolberg and Long (1999) and Alba (2005) argue that religion functions as a "bright line" between Muslims and non-Muslims that constitutes a significant division within societies. Experimental studies and survey data both support the notion that Muslims and Islam are viewed with substantial skepticism in Europe: between 23 and 41% of European country respondents agreed that "Muslims want to impose their religious law on everyone else" (Pew Research Center 2018; see also Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2016; Helbling and Traunmüller 2018), even though a comprehensive overview of global Muslim attitudes concludes that Muslims are "neither extraordinarily religious nor inclined to favor mixing religion and politics" (Fish

2011, 64). Detrimental perceptions and actions toward Muslims have also been documented in countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Poynting and Perry 2007; Miller 2017; Shaver et al. 2017).

Many people living in Western liberal democracies view Muslims with such wariness that scholars have developed the term "Islamophobia" to denote sweeping forms of unwarranted hostility toward them (Allen 2010; Bleich 2011; Esposito and Kalin 2011; Helbling 2012). For social scientific purposes, Islamophobia involves "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims" (Bleich 2011, 1585). In its starkest form, Islamophobia thus involves anger, fear, hatred, or suspicion of Islam or Muslims as a whole. It is often measured through questionnaires designed to detect animus along a variety of dimensions (Lee et al. 2013; Hopkins and Shook 2017). This has allowed researchers to test its consistency across countries (Uenal et al. 2021) and to link it at the individual level to outcomes such as voting, policy preferences, or psychological distress among Muslims themselves (Imhoff and Recker 2012; Kunst, Sam, and Ulleberg 2013; Helbling and Traunmüller 2018; Lajevardi 2020).

Expressions of Islamophobia reveal individual attitudes, but they also constitute an intense form of "boundary-making." Since the 1960s, researchers have examined how societal distinctions are created, reinforced, or effaced through a variety of interactions (Barth 1969; Brubaker 2009; Wimmer 2013). The boundary metaphor evokes a line that separates two groups, or, as Lamont and Molnár (2002, 169) describe it, "segmentation between 'us' and 'them.'" In theory, boundaries can distinguish groups seen as equals, but in practice they often lead to social hierarchies, with some groups viewed as more favored, trusted, or welcomed as "ingroups" and others as disfavored "outgroups" (Hagendoorn 1995; Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Dovidio and Gaertner, 2010; Axt, Ebersole, and Nosek 2014; Bleich, Nisar, and Vazquez 2018). The stigmatization associated with Muslims in American society may partly be a function of expressions of Islamophobia, but it need not be so. The "othering" that creates social hierarchies of insiders and outsiders can be communicated through a variety of signals that fall short of unambiguous forms of outright prejudice.

Attitudes and beliefs about Muslims and Islam that constitute these important boundaries are shaped by a wide range of factors, each of which may affect individuals to a different degree. When asked in a 2007 survey about the biggest influence on their views on Muslims, for example, just over 10% of respondents cited religious beliefs, while just under 20% named education

or personal experience. The single most important factor listed by those sur-
veyed, however, was the media. Almost a third of all respondents said that
the media had the largest impact on their views of Muslims, a proportion
that rose to 48% among those who held negative views of Muslims (Pew
Research Center 2007). Since most people in the United States have limited
contact with Muslims in their everyday lives, it makes sense that the media
play a key role in forming attitudes. They do so when they report statements
by politicians or publish opinion pieces by writers sympathetic or hostile to
Muslims (Ali et al. 2011). They also do it when they identify either a terrorist
group or a sports star as Muslim, and when they choose to write stories about
Islamic museum exhibits or Muslim charities instead of a foreign war zone.
What the media communicate both reflects and reinforces perceptions of
Muslims that shape social boundaries in our societies.

The significance of the media: Negativity, representations, and effects

If we want to understand the stigmatization of Muslims, we have to know
more about media coverage and how it matters. We focus in particular on
negative coverage, which research shows is relatively widespread and mean-
ingful for attitudes and actions. Studies of media gatekeeping—the pro-
cess by which journalists select which events from the real world are worth
reporting—have frequently emphasized the particularly strong perceived
newsworthiness of negative coverage (Shoemaker 1996; Soroka 2012). The
prevalence of negativity also has a disproportionate influence on cognition
and attitudes, given that "negative information receives more processing and
contributes more strongly to the final impression than does positive informa-
tion" (Baumeister et al. 2001, 323–24; Soroka and McAdams 2015; Soroka,
Fournier, and Nir 2019).

Studies of political attitudes suggest that negative information about
groups can be gleaned through skimming newspaper articles or even
headlines (Weinberger and Westen 2008), but the impact is greater if ex-
posure is repeated. As Fairclough (2013, 45) argues, "the effects of media
power are cumulative, working through the repetition of particular ways
of handling causality and agency." Once an opinion about another group—
including a prejudice—takes root, it is difficult to change. Social psycholog-
ical theories suggest that even "repeated exposure to counter-stereotypical

information" is unlikely to undo negative evaluations of groups (Lupia et al. 2015, 1).[3] Stereotypical information thus leaves a long-term residue of subconscious (implicit) negative attitudes that can trigger conscious (explicit) responses toward marginalized groups as well as toward policies that affect them (Erisen, Lodge, and Taber 2014; Arendt and Northup 2015; Pérez 2016; Kroon, van der Meer, and Mastro 2021).

Scholars have shown how this dynamic operates with respect to marginalized groups in a wide variety of settings (Eberl et al. 2018). In the US context, for example, Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) demonstrate through experimental methods that even brief exposure to a television news report identifying a Black perpetrator of crime amplifies White respondents' beliefs that African Americans are not part of the cultural mainstream, and intensifies their preferences for punitive policies. Similarly, Arendt and Northup (2015) find that long-term exposure to local television news (known for stereotypically depicting African Americans as criminals) correlates with negative implicit attitudes toward African Americans. They also find that heavy readers of Austrian tabloid crime stories express relatively more negative implicit attitudes toward foreigners. In other European countries, scholars have identified a relationship between negative media tone and perceptions that immigration is a significant societal problem (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009), stereotypes about immigrants (Schemer 2012), and views that immigrants endanger the host society (Schlueter and Davidov 2013).[4]

Studies over the past two decades confirm that coverage of Muslims has been markedly negative (Ahmed and Matthes 2017), regardless of whether the method of analysis involves close readings of relatively few articles (Abrahamian 2003; Jackson 2010; Powell 2011) or larger overviews of hundreds or even hundreds of thousands of articles (Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008; Trevino, Kanso, and Nelson 2010; Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013; Terman 2017; Yazdiha 2020). Even when research reveals a more complex portrayal of Muslims, it tends to find that positive depictions exist alongside negative ones, not that the former outweigh the latter (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007; Bleich et al. 2015; Bowe, Fahmy, and Matthes 2015). The epigrammatic joke by the comedian Maz Jobrani that opened this chapter

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[3] Other research suggests, however, that positive media portrayals can help offset negative stereotypes under certain circumstances (Mastro and Tukachinsky 2011; Schemer 2012).
[4] These relationships were nuanced by other factors such as intensity of coverage (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009), political knowledge (Schemer 2012), or the size of the immigrant population (Schlueter and Davidov 2013).

Table 1.1 Feeling thermometer results for three religious groups

Year	Poll name	Catholics	Jews	Muslims
2007	American Faith Matters Survey	62	57	42
2011	American Faith Matters Survey	61	58	44
2014	American Trends Panel Survey	62	63	40

aptly captures the widespread assumption that even a rare light story might quickly be tempered by a dark turn.

What is the effect of such negative coverage on public attitudes? There is substantial indirect evidence that it generates aversion, skepticism, and hostility to Muslims. Table 1.1 displays the results of three comparative "feeling thermometer" polls, in which American respondents give groups a score between 0 and 100 based on the warmth of their feelings, where 50 represents a neutral sentiment.[5] The average score for Muslims is below 50, and substantially lower than that for other major religious groups.[6] These measures of explicit attitudes are consistent with studies of implicit attitudes, which demonstrate that Muslims are a disfavored category compared to White individuals (J. Park, Felix, and Lee 2007) as well as with respect to Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus (Axt, Ebersole, and Nosek 2014).

A growing number of scholars also provide more direct evidence of the impact of the media on attitudes toward Muslims. Survey research of over 16,500 New Zealanders identified a correlation between news consumption and elevated levels of anger and lower levels of warmth toward Muslims (Shaver et al. 2017).[7] Experimental work among American respondents demonstrates that exposure to negative stories increases not only general resentment toward Muslims, but also preferences for discriminatory restrictions on Muslim Americans and for military action in Muslim countries (Saleem, Yang, and Ramasubramanian 2016; Saleem et al. 2017; Lajevardi 2020, 108–31). Moreover, negative media coverage has been shown

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[5] The data are from Putnam et al. (2007); Putnam et al. (2011), and Pew Research Center (2014a), respectively.

[6] Similar findings in British surveys indicate that a moderately larger Muslim population does not automatically lead to greater warmth (A. Park et al. 2010; National Centre for Social Research 2010; ICM Unlimited 2015).

[7] Research by Ogan et al. (2014) showed that survey respondents who paid greater attention to news stories about the 2010 Park51 Islamic community center controversy in New York City had stronger anti-Muslim attitudes.

to affect Muslims themselves. When Muslims feel that the media are biased against them, they are more likely to feel lower trust in government (Saleem et al. 2019), to feel lower identification with their national communities (Kunst et al. 2012; Saleem et al. 2019), and to feel a greater affiliation to an imagined global Muslim community (Güney 2010). In short, negative media coverage matters for public attitudes toward Muslims and for Muslims' own attitudes and identities.[8] All this underscores the importance of developing a better understanding of how the media represent Muslims.

What more can we learn? Tone-checking, explaining negativity, and four comparisons

Existing research largely concurs that coverage of Muslims is negative. Yet this masks how much we still do not know. In particular, there has been no clear or consistent way to gauge precisely how much negativity is present in stories about Muslims. Given that media producers and consumers are drawn to negative coverage in general (Soroka 2014; Trussler and Soroka 2014), it is possible that the bulk of reporting on Muslims is no more negative than the average story. Even if journalism about Muslims is negative overall, this finding may simply parallel coverage of other religious or ethnic groups, particularly those seen as cultural outsiders. What we need is a common baseline for measuring tone across sets of stories. This would allow us to accurately describe media coverage of Muslims and to understand how it compares to coverage of other groups, how it has shifted over time, and how it varies by country. It would enable us to "tone-check" articles for their positivity or negativity, much in the way that organizations "fact-check" reporting for its accuracy.

What makes some Muslim articles more negative than others? Perhaps pervasive negativity is linked to *geography*, given that stories about foreign locations are often associated with more negative coverage (Peterson 1981; Nossek 2004) and that the press extensively covers Muslim-majority countries with which the United States has tense relations. It is also plausible that negative coverage is primarily related to specific violent *events*, such as terrorism or political conflict more broadly, which have been found to create

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[8] As Schlueter, Masso, and Davidov (2020) show, however, media tone is not always the most important factor in all contexts.

"media storms" that amplify negativity (Hamilton 2000; Boydstun, Hardy, and Walgrave 2014; Harcup and O'Neill 2017). Perceived or actual *cultural differences* are another possible source of negativity in reporting. Stories revolving around extremism, religiosity, and women's rights or other "value clashes" have frequently been associated with societal tensions (Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007; Helbling and Traunmüller 2018; Sides and Mogahed 2018). Finally, some research finds that *market* characteristics of newspapers can affect coverage of Muslims, given that journalists and readers of conservative or tabloid newspapers may be more inclined toward skeptical or sensationalist coverage (Conboy 2005; Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005; Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010). To pinpoint more clearly the main drivers of negative coverage, we must examine all of these elements, both separately and together.

Articles mentioning Muslims and Islam have been widely argued to be negative, but are they more negative than those touching on comparable groups? Most research on media portrayals of Muslims focuses uniquely on Muslims. It may be the case, however, that journalists write about religious or ethnic groups primarily when they are involved in significant controversies. If this were true, articles about other world religious groups, such as Catholics, Jews, or Hindus, might focus largely on topics such as pedophilia scandals, harsh treatment of Palestinians in Israeli-occupied territories, or extreme nationalism and riots in India. Stories about US groups such as African Americans, Latinos, Mormons, or atheists—often perceived or treated as outgroups—may also disproportionately focus on controversial events likely to spark strong reader reactions. In short, the negativity inherent in articles about Islam and Muslims may contribute to stigmatization, but it might stand out as less noteworthy if it were consistent with coverage of other world religions or marginalized groups in the United States. We need to compare coverage of a wide variety of religious, racial, ethnic, and social groups to see if reporting on Muslims is distinctly negative.

Some scholars have argued that 9/11 generated a significant shift in media portrayals of Muslims (Martin and Phelan 2002; Abrahamian 2003; Bail 2012). Others have noted a longer-standing propensity of the media to cover Muslims and Islam using simplistic or negative frames (Mortimer 1981; Said 1997; Silva 2017). Still others have argued that 9/11 actually engendered somewhat more nuanced or even positive coverage (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007; Alsultany 2012; Bleich, Nisar, and Abdelhamid 2016). Did the tone of articles about Muslims become substantially more negative following

9/11, did it become more positive, or has negativity simply been a pervasive and enduring feature of the American media landscape? It is essential to grasp these long-term patterns, but it is equally important to understand the short-term effects of particular events. Terrorist incidents like 9/11 generate a spike in coverage. But how do dramatic events affect not just the amount of coverage but also its tone, as well as the specific words likely to appear? How long do these effects endure? Fine-grained, day-by-day information about the tone of stories can help us to discern patterns over time more clearly than ever before.

Most studies of media portrayals of Muslims are situated within a single country. While this facilitates an understanding of a particular setting, it has been nearly impossible to compare cross-national coverage of Muslims. Scholars have shown that stories about Muslims are negative in almost every individual location (Ahmed and Matthes 2017). Yet we do not know whether the tone of coverage is similarly negative everywhere, or if it varies dramatically depending on the country. This uncertainty holds with respect to the tone of coverage as well as with regard to the specific terms that journalists are most likely to use. Does international coverage of Muslims resemble American coverage, or is US journalism unique in certain ways? Are the principal words used to describe Muslims and Islam substantially the same or quite different across countries? Answering these questions allows us to understand whether there are important national distinctions in media coverage or whether, instead, there is something approaching a Western or perhaps global media discourse about Muslims.

Finally, while existing research provides insights into the topics most associated with Muslims in the media, we know less about variation within and across topics. Stories about Muslims frequently contain references to conflict and violence, for example; but what proportion of those stories cast Muslims as victims of violence rather than as instigators of conflict? And do the media use different words when covering Muslims in these different ways? Because existing scholarship has focused attention on the most negative aspects of coverage, it has been difficult to identify how often stories touch on topics that may not be as resolutely negative. What noteworthy themes are present in a significant number of US newspaper articles related to Muslims and Islam that have not been analyzed by researchers, and to what extent do they function as sources of relative positivity?

In short, there are a series of important questions about media coverage of Muslims that have not been adequately addressed until now:

1. How negative are stories about Muslims compared to the average media story?
2. Is the bulk of the negativity in stories about Muslims accounted for by coverage of foreign locations, by violent events, by cultural differences, or by newspaper type?
3. Is coverage of Muslims more negative than that of comparable world religious groups? Is coverage of Muslim Americans more negative than that of other marginalized domestic racial, ethnic, or religious groups?
4. Is negativity an enduring feature of the US media landscape, or has the tone of Muslim articles fluctuated over time? Was 9/11 a major turning point? How do article frequency, tone, and prominent words shift in response to events?
5. Is negativity unique to the US or is it more widespread? Do newspapers outside of the United States tend to cover Muslims in a similar way with respect to tone and prominent words found in coverage?
6. What meaningful nuances exist within coverage of Muslims that have not yet been identified by researchers? Are there any topics associated with Muslims that are not resoundingly negative?

Answering these questions will provide a much richer understanding not only of the factors that shape media representations of Muslims, but also of how such representations compare across groups, time, countries, and topics. Tone-checking coverage can help us see whether the media may be wittingly or unwittingly contributing to the stigmatization of Muslims by constructing, reinforcing, or reconfiguring the symbolic and social boundaries that define marginalized groups within our societies.

Our approach

To address the six sets of questions, we introduce a systematic way to gauge the tone of articles. We focus our analysis on newspaper coverage, as newspapers offer several key advantages for the long-term study of representations of social groups. They have circulated for decades (some for more than a century), which allows us to explore periods prior to key historical turning points, such as September 11, 2001, in our case. Newspapers typically offer a wider range of daily stories than their counterparts in television or radio, providing a richer array of information. They commonly serve as

agenda-setters for other media outlets (Golan 2006; Zhang 2018), including, to some degree, for social media platforms in the contemporary era (Harder, Sevenans, and Van Aelst 2017; Vargo and Guo 2017; Stern, Livan, and Smith 2020). In addition, compared to other forms of media, newspapers are generally more factual and less emotional (Nisbet, Ostman, and Shanahan 2009, 174–76), and thus less prone on average to sensationalism or hyperbole. If we discern negativity in newspapers, in other words, it is likely to exist at least as strongly on other media platforms.

We start by examining a representative sample of 48,283 newspaper articles drawn from over a dozen American sources across a 20-year period. Assessing the tone of this essentially random set of stories provides a baseline against which other articles can be compared. We then use computer-assisted methods and corpus linguistics techniques to analyze all 256,963 articles that mention Muslims or Islam in 17 national and regional US newspapers over a 21-year period. By calibrating this set (or *corpus*) of articles against the representative sample, we can say with confidence that articles about Muslims are negative. More importantly, we can demonstrate precisely how negative they are compared to the average newspaper article. We also explore the degree to which people are able to discern differences in the tone of texts and show that most can identify which is more negative even when the tone varies by a relatively small amount. This suggests that readers are capable of tone-checking articles in real time.

We then carry out four types of comparison: across groups, across time, across countries, and across topics. First, we gather all 641,982 articles that mention Catholics, Jews, and Hindus from the same US newspapers and time period. This allows us to understand whether coverage of Muslims is negative compared to other religious groups. We also collect 175,447 articles mentioning African Americans, Latinos, Mormons, and atheists. We compare those to the 30,445 articles focusing more specifically on Muslims in the United States to see whether this subset of Muslim articles differs from coverage of other domestic outgroups. Because our articles about Muslims extend from January 1996 to December 2016, we can track the evolution of coverage across more than two decades of daily newspaper production. We can thus identify long-term patterns and compare articles pre- and post-9/11. It also means we can assess the short-term effects of multiple events on article frequency, tone, and word selection. Looking beyond the United States, we assemble a corpus of 528,444 Muslim articles from Britain, Canada, and Australia. These articles allow us to see how American media coverage of

Muslims compares to coverage in other Anglophone countries, situated both nearby and on two different continents. We also conduct a probe on 79,397 articles from six newspapers drawn from different countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa to understand whether the patterns we discern in the Anglophone North hold elsewhere in the world. In total, we analyze the tone of more than 1.6 million articles in the process of assessing how US Muslim coverage compares along these multiple dimensions.

To get the most complete picture of how the media cover Muslims, we use a combination of deductive and inductive methods. Our deductive approach aims to advance scholarly theories about what drives negative coverage of Muslims and Islam. We identify specific, concrete expectations about particular factors that are presumed to be associated with negative coverage. As noted above, researchers have argued that the geographic location of a story, a focus on events or on cultural differences, or market incentives of right-leaning or tabloid newspapers may account for negativity in stories about Muslims or Islam. We test these propositions by tagging all articles containing specific words or phrases that are associated with different topics, as well as marking different types of newspapers. This allows us to estimate which factors are most strongly associated with negativity in articles about Muslims.

Our inductive approach lets the articles speak for themselves. We use computer-assisted topic modeling algorithms to wend through the 256,963 articles in our US Muslim corpus. This method identifies clusters of words found together within articles. These words suggest the main themes of coverage in our articles. They confirm the presence of some topics previously identified by scholars, but also uncover some that have not been heavily emphasized in the deductive literature, and that are comparatively more positive. Our inductive approach thus reveals more about what journalists cover than we can see through a deductive lens alone. It also adds greater nuance to our deductive findings.

When working with more than a million articles, it is impossible for a researcher to read even a small fraction of them. Our computer-assisted methods are designed to capture systematic elements in large bodies of articles. They are also replicable in ways that human coding is not, given the variability that individuals bring to interpreting the same text. Yet computer coding is not well-equipped to handle irony, word-play, metaphors, or emotional stories that simultaneously evoke sympathy while conveying the brutality of an event. We therefore regularly draw samples of articles from our

corpora and read the words on the page. This helps ensure that our data analysis does not lead us to unwarranted conclusions. Reading these articles—and conveying portions of them in this book—also provides a more direct connection to what articles about Muslims and Islam are actually saying.

What we find

Are articles that mention Muslims or Islam more negative than the average news story? Simply put: yes, and overwhelmingly so. While it is not surprising that there are more negative articles than positive ones, the extent of the disparity is striking. As we show in chapter 2, there are more than four times as many negative articles in our Muslim corpus as positive ones. And they are not just slightly more negative. The *average* Muslim article is more negative than over 84% of our *entire* representative sample of American newspaper articles.

To convey a sense of the disparity, consider this sentence that has a neutral tone: "A Muslim cleric from the US Navy will arrive today to discuss religious issues." As anodyne as those words may sound, they are unusual. The tone of Muslim articles is better reflected in sentences like the following, each of which has a tone equivalent to the average article in our Muslim corpus:

- "The Russian was made to believe by undercover agents that the radioactive material was to be delivered to a Muslim organization."
- "Sami Al-Arian, 49, a former professor of computer science at the University of South Florida, began the hunger strike on January 22 to protest efforts to force him to testify before a grand jury investigating Muslim charities in northern Virginia."
- "One person was killed and at least 10 wounded yesterday when suspected Muslim militants threw grenades at people celebrating a Hindu festival in northeastern India, police said."
- "Moderski also has had business relationships with Shamsud-din Ali, the Muslim cleric and friend of Mayor Street who was convicted last year on racketeering and related charges, and given a seven-year jail sentence."[9]

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[9] *New York Times*, April 15, 2009; *Washington Post*, February 16, 2007; *Philadelphia Daily News*, October 14, 2002; *Philadelphia Daily News*, January 20, 2006.

The typical Muslim article simply contains much more negativity than positivity. Reading strongly negative articles that touch on Muslims or Islam is the norm, not an exception. Muslim stories that are neutral or positive when compared to the average newspaper article are, by contrast, unusual. We conduct an experiment in chapter 2 to test how well readers can accurately identify which texts are more positive or negative at a variety of levels of tone difference. Our results suggest that approximately three-quarters of readers would recognize the average Muslim story as more negative than the average story in our representative sample of US newspaper articles.

What accounts for the negativity of Muslim articles? In chapter 3, we review scholarship on geography, events, cultural differences, and market characteristics of newspapers as likely drivers of negativity. We use statistical techniques to estimate the associations between these types of factors and the tone of coverage. We find that stories set in foreign locations, those that touch on conflict or extremism, and those published in tabloids are most strongly associated with negative coverage in American newspapers. By contrast, articles that touch on religiosity or presumed value clashes and those published in right-leaning newspapers are not substantially more negative. Importantly, however, even setting aside articles associated with the most negative factors, coverage of Muslims remains negative. In other words, articles about Muslims that are not set exclusively abroad, that make no mention of violence or extremism, and that are published in broadsheets rather than tabloids are *still* negative.

Chapter 3 also delves into cross-group comparisons. Muslim articles are strongly negative compared not only to randomly selected newspaper articles, but also to stories touching on other world religions and domestic outgroups. At various points in US history, Catholics and Jews were considered cultural minorities and viewed with substantial suspicion. The boundaries between these groups and the "mainstream" have faded over the past few decades—a transition that may well be reflected in the fact that the average article about each of these groups is close in tone to the average of our representative corpus. By contrast, Hindus share many similarities with Muslims: they are primarily associated with foreign locations, make up under 1% of the US population, do not belong to what some argue is the "Judeo-Christian" cultural tradition of the country, and are predominantly non-White. We expected, therefore, that articles touching on Hindus would more closely resemble those about Muslims than those about Catholics or Jews. Yet articles in our Hindu corpus are only modestly negative in tone

compared to those in our representative corpus. Hindu articles resemble those about the other major religious groups much more closely than they resemble Muslim articles.

We find the same distinctive quality when we compare coverage of Muslim Americans to that of other domestic outgroups. Articles about Muslims in the United States are less negative than articles about Muslims taken as a whole, yet they are still strongly negative. Moreover, they are substantially more negative than articles that mention historically stigmatized racial or ethnic groups such as African Americans or Latinos.[10] In addition, they are more negative than articles that touch on other, relatively smaller groups that surveys consistently show are viewed skeptically by American respondents, such as Mormons or atheists. There is something distinctly negative about coverage of Muslims that cannot be explained simply by demographic, geographic, cultural, or ethno-racial differences.

This is not because of 9/11. Our analysis in chapter 4 definitively demonstrates that long-term coverage of Muslims was just as negative prior to September 11, 2001 as after. The tone of articles immediately following prominent terrorist attacks almost always drops measurably, but the effect is typically short-lived. The overall tone most commonly reverts to pre-attack levels within a month or two. The 9/11 and other terrorist attacks do generate spikes in the amount of articles mentioning Muslims or Islam, as well as shifts in the prevalence of different topics. The raw number of Muslim articles jumped dramatically in the wake of 9/11 and had not receded to pre-9/11 levels by 2016. There has also been much greater coverage of terrorism and extremism since 9/11. Corresponding positive events, such as a major speech by President Obama or the celebration associated with the annual Islamic holy month of Ramadan, do not have as much of an influence on either the amount or the tone of coverage. Major terrorist events like 9/11 thus drive surges in articles, but only temporary increases in negativity. Over the 21 years of our study, there has been no overall long-term rise or fall in the tone of Muslim articles.

In chapter 5, we confirm that our findings for the United States hold in the three other Anglophone countries we examine. Muslim articles in Britain, Canada, and Australia are similar to those in American newspapers in most

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[10] In other work, we have shown that Muslim articles are also much more negative than articles touching on Asian Americans or Native Americans (Media Portrayals of Minorities Project 2019, 2020, 2021).

key ways. Patterns in both the amount and the tone of coverage closely parallel our US findings, as do the factors associated with the greatest negativity, as well as the words most commonly used to describe Muslims or Islam. The evidence from these four countries is consistent with a view that there may be a common Western journalistic approach to stories touching on Muslims or Islam, or at least one that holds in predominantly Anglophone countries in the Global North.

Our probe into six newspapers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa, however, demonstrates that coverage of Muslims is not simply dictated by world events. In most of these newspapers, coverage of Muslims remains negative on average, but this negativity is simply far less intense than in the United States, Britain, Canada, or Australia. In fact, in the Malaysian newspaper we analyze, the tone of the average Muslim article is modestly *positive*. In addition, the specific words most commonly associated with Muslims and Islam in these six newspapers are much more varied than those in our Anglophone North newspapers. Media around the world have more latitude to select stories and to frame discussions than an analysis of US newspapers alone would imply.

Nor is there a uniform media discourse within the United States, as we show in chapter 6. Our topic modeling analysis demonstrates, for example, that newspapers cover Muslims differently depending on the geographic context in which the stories are set. Reporting on Muslim-majority countries varies from that on Muslim-minority countries, where stories are more likely to highlight separatism, militancy, and extremism. By further contrast, in contexts where Muslims have been victimized by non-Muslim groups (such as in Bosnia or Kosovo in the 1990s, or with respect to the Rohingya or Uighurs in the 2010s), we see an emphasis on Muslims as a vulnerable group or simply as civilians. Our inductive approach also reveals that approximately a third of all stories are not primarily associated with the major themes identified by previous research. While almost no topic related to Muslim coverage is positive, several of these themes are linked with far less negativity than others, suggesting pathways for journalists to pursue if they are seeking more balanced coverage of Muslims and Islam over the longer term.

Our concluding chapter summarizes the main findings of our research, the most important of which bears emphasizing here: coverage of Muslims in the United States is strikingly negative by any comparative measure. This negativity is not simply explained by radical Islamist violence, by coverage of foreign conflict zones, or by any other factor we explore, alone or in

combination with others. Articles mentioning Muslims or Islam are negative compared to those touching on all groups we investigate. They are consistently and enduringly negative across time. If US newspaper articles tend to be more negative than stories in many Global South locations, their negativity is mirrored in countries from the Anglophone North. This negativity is somewhat nuanced when we take a closer look at different topics covered by newspapers, but the vast majority of themes associated with Muslims remain highly negative.

We draw on these core findings to reflect on whether American newspapers—and the media more broadly—may be fostering Islamophobia, and how they serve to reinforce boundaries between social groups that contribute to ongoing stigmatization of Muslims. We also suggest that journalists and citizens develop the instinct to tone-check the media in an effort to limit the harmful effects of the deep and abiding negativity so commonly associated with Muslims and Islam.