

How racist narratives about Muslims in the British press were reconfigured during the initial peak of COVID-19



Elizabeth Poole and **Milly Williamson** examine UK newspaper coverage of Muslims during the first wave of the pandemic. They find such coverage ultimately reinforced the hegemonic representational framework that has developed since 9/11 by drawing on wider longstanding tropes in which marginalized groups are 'othered', subject to moral panics, and accused of refusing to integrate.

A well-established trajectory of research demonstrates that the UK's news media represents Muslims within a narrow and largely negative framework. However, it became immediately obvious during the initial wave of the COVID-19 crisis in Spring 2020 that a disproportionate number of ethnic minorities in the UK, many of these health workers, were dying of Coronavirus, including Muslims. This was occurring alongside the UK media's more widespread recognition of NHS staff.

As researchers who have studied British press coverage of Muslims since the 1990s, this led us to ask whether we were witnessing the emergence of an alternative framework of reporting on Muslims, or whether the contours of racist ideologies were able to reshape and reanimate old ideas of 'good immigrant' versus 'bad immigrant' as Muslim key workers were distinguished in the reporting from other Muslims. We addressed these questions [by analysing the reporting in four UK newspapers](#) (*Daily Mail*, *The Telegraph*, *The Sun* and *The Mirror*) in April 2020 – the initial peak of the crisis.

This coverage should be considered within a recent history of representation where narratives about Muslims as a security and cultural threat have become normalised. Immigration, 9/11, further terrorist attacks, the financial crash of 2008/9, and the refugee crisis have all exacerbated a wider racist political climate amplified by the 'hostile environment' in the UK, introduced by Theresa May as Home Secretary in 2012, and further pursued by subsequent Conservative governments. But anti-Muslim racism is not immutable: it adapts and stretches over new situations, including the new context of the pandemic. Since 9/11, anti-Muslim racism has taken on aspects of progressivism by aligning with what are considered to be the great advances of modernity while denying them to Muslims (free speech is one example). In a post-racial media environment, how did the news media navigate narratives of equality, and positive attitudes to health workers, with existing pre-conceptions and assumptions that exist in normalized anti-Muslim racism?

To examine this, we searched both the Nexis database and newspapers websites for stories about Islam or Muslims and Covid or Coronavirus from 30 March to 30 April 2020. This retrieved 99 articles, 48 in the *Daily Mail*, 26 in *The Telegraph*, 32 in *The Sun*, 33 in *The Mirror*, and these were fairly evenly split between home and international news (54:45). We also included articles about Muslim health workers who died of Coronavirus by searching for them by name (to include those that did not refer to their religious identity). We used a qualitative approach to analysing the stories examining the main themes, discourse and narratives.

We argue that the pandemic provided a trigger point for news media looking to reassert hegemonic understandings of race, migration, and welfare in the following ways: 1) the 'massification' of Muslims, particularly in discussions of burials, 2) the creation of a moral panic over the construction of Muslims as refusing to social distance, particularly during religious festivals, 3) and a reconfiguration of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims to acknowledge their role in the NHS while continuing to construct Muslims in general as atavistic and un-British.

From stories of kindness to images of horror

'Positive' narratives about Muslims, supported initially by stories about community initiatives and volunteering, soon gave way to macabre and sensationalist imagery of a buildup of coffins at mosques. One article in the *Daily Mail* contained 13 images, mostly of coffins. Massification was a key aspect of this narrative, where quoting numbers contributed to the wider media panic about the pandemic. However, these stories also demonstrated the high number of deaths within the Muslim population and Muslim civic character.

The morbid interest in death was also evident in a misleading story on ‘mass graves’ which ran in all newspapers, and which in *The Daily Mail* was reported as ‘Mass graves for up to 10 bodies are being dug in Muslim cemetery where 13-year-old Ismail was buried as Islamic community is devastated by coronavirus pandemic’. [These graves were actually pre-dug rows](#) with individual chambers with each burial conducted separately of a known individual, not mass graves where often multiple people who are often unknown to each other are buried together. Coverage sensationalised this event by repeating the term ‘mass graves’ with all its associations of inhumanity, barbarity, disposability and mediocrity. Complaints about the report, including a statement from the cemetery, led to the term being replaced in *The Mirror* and *The Telegraph*, however, two of *The Telegraph*’s subsequent articles made similar assertions and linked these to the cost to councils reinforcing longstanding tropes about Muslim/migrants as benefitting from welfare.

Moral panics over social distancing (controlling the Muslims)

This was a strong feature of international news, including speculation on the status of the annual Hajj to Mecca, and featured images of the mass gathering of Muslims, particularly in the build-up to Ramadan. One example in *The Sun* described how ‘THOUSANDS of Muslim men are seen attending a packed Friday prayer service despite concerns of the new coronavirus outbreak’.

However, this was not limited to international news. The media ‘panic’ around social distancing reached a peak just before Ramadan, at the end of this sample, which saw numerous stories and appeals (including from Matt Hancock, then the Health Secretary) to Muslims to behave according to the regulations, with little evidence that they were flouting the rules more than other sections of the population. This builds on historical scripts about a lack of integration (adherence to UK rules) and draws on far-right narratives that circulated on social media at the start of lockdown which used images of pre-lockdown gatherings of Muslims. This resulted in a new pandemic trope about Muslims, blaming them for the spread of Coronavirus, which has been evident worldwide, and undermines more balanced accounts of Muslims at this time.

The reconfiguration of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims

The number of ethnic minority health workers dying of Coronavirus forced the news media, most unusually, to discuss issues of structural discrimination. This was necessary to retain legitimacy and engage readers in this new climate. Four of the first doctors to die in the UK were also Muslims, followed by another four doctors and two nurses in the coming weeks. However, what was notable about this coverage was, in most cases, the absence of the signifier Muslim in discussing them. We are not arguing here that the religious signifier should be applied to all stories about Muslims when it is irrelevant (thus essentialising Muslims; IPSO guidelines also advises against this). We were instead interested to note when this is and is not considered to be of significance in press discourse which speaks to its ideological function.

In the context of cultural racism, here the Muslimness is deemed largely irrelevant and so omitted. Often, references to the religious identity of the victims in these articles were incidental, identifiable through another religious signifier such as the headscarf worn by Muslim nurse Areema Nasreen. However, this is one example of coverage where religious identity becomes more central when she is quoted as wanting to inspire others from Muslim backgrounds. These reports borrow from an [ideological tradition](#) of separating out ‘good’ from ‘bad’ Muslims, which is predicated on the extent to which Muslims distance themselves from the (ideologically constructed) assumed inherently violent tendencies of Islam. The NHS victims provide evidence of the deserving Muslims who contribute to British society and is indicative of a political environment whereby Muslims must overcompensate to be deserving of their place in Western societies, conferring on them a [conditional acceptance](#) that functions to manage their behaviour.

It should be noted that *The Mirror*, a left-leaning tabloid, offers us a glimpse of what an alternative framework of reporting might look like with stories presenting the experience and voices of ordinary Muslims, a perspective that is usually absent from press coverage, normalizing Muslims (see the [full article](#) for more).

Conclusion

It appeared initially that the COVID-19 crisis might provide an opportunity to challenge norms and reframe news discourses about Muslims in the UK with coverage which generally casts healthcare workers as 'heroes' (also problematic). However, the signifier 'Muslim', so heavily imbued with negative connotations and functioning to signify 'otherness', was often left out of these stories. Meanwhile the press reverted back to familiar narratives drawing on and reworking wider longstanding tropes in which marginalised groups are 'othered', subject to moral panics, and accused of refusing to integrate.

These findings should be interpreted in the context of a political landscape that has become increasingly hostile to immigration which is linked to the politics of scarcity. As austerity measures bite in the recession following the pandemic, this hegemonic framework is likely to continue, with Muslims as the 'suspect' communities through which racist discourses continue to be legitimised.

Note: the above draws on the authors' [published work](#) in *Journalism*.

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