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Written Evidence to the Citizens
Commission on Islam,
Participation & Public Life

PART 3: THE MEDIA

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Disclaimer

Responsibility for any errors lies with the author.

INTRODUCTION

1. This submission is based on written evidence I submitted to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia on the 16th October 2013.
2. The original submission can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/APPG-media>.

ISLAM, MUSLIMS & THE MEDIA: RESEARCH FINDINGS 2001-12

3. Research has shown that the role and impact of the media is “contentious and debatable”¹.
4. Historically, opinion polls have suggested that 74% of the British public claim that they know ‘nothing or next to nothing about Islam’².
5. Similarly, 64% of the British public claim that what they do know is ‘acquired through the media’³.
6. Research from 2006 suggested that the amount of press coverage about Muslims and Islam in British national newspapers had increased by around 270% over the preceding decade⁴.
7. Of that, 91% was deemed negative⁵.
8. In addition, 84% of that coverage was seen to represent Islam and Muslims either as ‘likely to cause damage or danger’ or as ‘operating in a time of intense difficulty or danger’⁶.

¹ Chris Allen & Jorgen Nielsen, *Summary report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001* (Vienna: EUMC, 2002) 46.

² YOUNGOV, *Attitudes towards British Muslims*, Islam Awareness Week (4 November 2002).

³ YOUNGOV, *Attitudes towards British Muslims*, Islam Awareness Week (4 November 2002).

⁴ INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007) p.xvii.

⁵ INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007) p.xvii.

⁶ INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007) p.xvii.

9. Research from 2008 confirmed that the amount of press coverage about Muslims and Islam had increased significantly since 2000, seeming to peak in 2006 while remaining high throughout 2007 and 2008⁷.
10. That same research illustrated that 2008 was the first year in which the volume of stories about 'religious and cultural difference' (32% of stories in 2008) outnumbered those relating to terrorism (27% in 2008)⁸.
11. As the findings from research conducted in 2007 set out, the consequence of this adverse media coverage was⁹:
 - Likely to provoke and increase feelings of insecurity, suspicion and anxiety amongst non-Muslims;
 - Likely to provoke feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims, and in this way to weaken the Government's measures to reduce and prevent extremism;
 - Unlikely to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of unlawful discrimination by non-Muslims against Muslims;
 - Likely to be a major barrier preventing the success of the Government's community cohesion policies and programmes;
 - Unlikely to contribute to informed discussion and debate amongst Muslims and non-Muslims about ways of working together to maintain and develop Britain as a multicultural, multi-faith democracy.

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE MEDIA: RECENT OBSERVATIONS

12. The Leveson Report published in 2012 highlighted a number of issues that reaffirmed the findings from existing research as regards the representation of Islam and Muslims¹⁰:

⁷ Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Lewis, *Images of Islam in the UK: the representation of British Muslims in the national print news media 2000-2008* (Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2008).

⁸ Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Lewis, *Images of Islam in the UK: the representation of British Muslims in the national print news media 2000-2008* (Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2008).

⁹ INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007) p.xvii.

¹⁰ See the Leveson Report, *An Inquiry into the Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press Vol.2* pp. 486-487 and pp. 668-673 http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0780/0780_ii.pdf.

- “[w]hen assessed as a whole, the evidence of discriminatory, sensational or unbalanced reporting in relation to ethnic minorities, immigrants and/or asylum seekers, is concerning. The press can have significant influence over community relations and the way in which parts of society perceive other parts”
 - “...it is important that stories on those issues are accurate, and are not calculated to exacerbate community divisions or increase resentment...there are enough examples of careless or reckless reporting to conclude that discriminatory, sensational or unbalanced reporting...is a feature of journalistic practice in parts of the press, rather than an aberration”.
 - “...there has been a significant tendency within the press which leads to the publication of prejudicial or pejorative references to race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or physical or mental illness or disability”
13. The lack of action since the publication of the Leveson Report is extremely disappointing and could be seen to be something of a lost opportunity with which to have acted on many of the issues that had been identified in the preceding decade.
14. Some more recent developments are worthy of further consideration however.
15. Following the brutal murder of Lee Rigby in Woolwich the perpetrators used social media to justify their actions by claiming to have acted ‘in the name of Islam’¹¹.
16. Given the extremely public and mediatised nature of the perpetrator’s declaration, the problematic nature of reporting such incidents was highlighted: to report or not. It is right that this should have featured in media’s resulting coverage of the event however balance should be sought in order that the claims of a few are not attributable to all Muslims without differentiation.
17. The difficulty in ensuring this type of balance should however be acknowledged.
18. The need for balance is given further emphasis by the fact that after Woolwich, opinion polls showed that nearly two-thirds of British people believe there will be a ‘clash of civilisations’ between British Muslims and white Britons in the foreseeable future¹².

¹¹ See for example the report in the Mirror <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/woolwich-attack-watch-shocking-video-1905144>

¹² See the Guardian article <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/may/25/woolwich-attack-islam>

19. Real-life events combined with the reporting of these by the media would therefore appear to have the very real potential to detrimentally impact cohesive and integrated communities.
20. Media coverage of the unexploded pipe bomb found outside the Aisha Mosque in Walsall in the West Midlands in 2013 highlighted another interesting point in that the reporting referred to as a ‘hate crime’ rather than an act of ‘terrorism’¹³.
21. Such practices might lead one to conclude that media coverage and the discourses that emerge from this focus rather more on the perpetrator – alleged or otherwise – than on the incident in order to define what is and is not seen to be ‘terrorism’.
22. Such a practice could have a negative impact in terms of the response and attitudes of Muslims and their communities.
23. As has been the case for a number of years, the post-Woolwich period presented an opportunity for a number of individuals to use their positions in the media to publicly attack the notion and concept of Islamophobia, the validity of the data that was being collected by the Government-funded Tell MAMA service, and also some of the individuals involved in collecting that data¹⁴.
24. It should be noted that at times, these attacks were extremely personal and vicious¹⁵.
25. It is fair to suggest that there are a handful of well-known journalists and commentators who at every opportunity make a concerted effort to undermine all evidence relating to

¹³ See the report in the Independent <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/police-call-homemade-bomb-outside-walsalls-ashia-mosque-a-hate-crime-and-draft-in-counterterror-police-8670548.html> as also the Guardian <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jun/23/suspicious-item-mosque-hate-crime> amongst others

¹⁴ See for example Andrew Gilligan’s article on the Telegraph website <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/10093568/The-truth-about-the-wave-of-attacks-on-Muslims-after-Woolwich-murder.html>, a follow-up report in the Daily Mail <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2334897/Truth-wave-attacks-Muslims-Woolwich-killing-Most-incidents-recorded-offensive-messages-Facebook-Twitter.html> and Charles Moore article also for the Telegraph <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/10120706/Woolwich-outrage-we-are-too-weak-to-face-up-to-the-extremism-in-our-midst.html>

¹⁵ I draw particular attention to Andrew Gilligan’s article <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/10093568/The-truth-about-the-wave-of-attacks-on-Muslims-after-Woolwich-murder.html>, as also Charles Moore’s <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/10120706/Woolwich-outrage-we-are-too-weak-to-face-up-to-the-extremism-in-our-midst.html>

Islamophobia in order to try and de-rail any attempt to tackle it at the political and policy levels¹⁶.

26. It is interesting to note that whilst in the past many of these individuals have suggested that their opposition has been against the concept and term 'Islamophobia' as opposed anti-Muslim hatred¹⁷, following Woolwich their attacks have been the same despite the term 'Islamophobia' rarely being used or featuring prominently in the ensuing discourses.
27. More recently, there has been extensive media coverage in relation to what the Muslim Council of Britain described as the 'moral panic' surrounding the wearing of the niqab¹⁸.
28. Clearly driven by institutional¹⁹ and political rhetoric²⁰, it might be appropriate to question the motivation and intention for such extensive media coverage especially when there were so few health professionals who apparently wear the niqab²¹ and given that bans were already in place – without controversy – in at least 17 hospitals across the country²².

¹⁶ See my July 2011 report to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia, "A momentous occasion": an independent report to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia" in particular the section on 'Commentators' (p.43 onwards)

http://issuu.com/drchrisallen/docs/chrisallen-appg_narrative_report-july_2011. See also my 2013 article for the Huffington Post, "Arson, attack and accusation: the need for balance and realism when considering Islamophobia" http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-chris-allen/islamisation-arson-attack-accusation_b_3417952.html

¹⁷ For example, see Andrew Gilligan's comments on the Telegraph website: "too often, the charge of "Islamophobia" has been used by Islamists to stifle and deter examination of their own actions. They deliberately conflate Islamism (followed by a tiny minority of British Muslims) with the entire faith of Islam, and accuse anyone who scrutinises or attacks their minority brand of fundamentalism of being "anti-Muslim" <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewgilligan/100065538/islamists-establish-a-bridgehead-in-parliament/>

¹⁸ <http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/MCBPress%20Release.pdf>

¹⁹ See the Birmingham Mail's coverage relating to the 'banning' of the niqab at Birmingham Metropolitan College <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/local-news/birmingham-metropolitan-college-bans-veils-5872305>

²⁰ See the Telegraph's coverage of the comments by Jeremy Browne regarding the banning of the niqab in schools and public places <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10311469/Jeremy-Browne-Ban-Muslim-women-from-wearing-veils-in-schools-and-public-places.html> and the BBC's coverage of Jeremy Hunt's call for a review of the wearing of the niqab by health professionals <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-24158041>

²¹ See the article in the Independent <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/few-if-any-muslim-hospital-workers-wear-full-veil-8826042.html>

²² See the article in the Telegraph <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/nhs/10319264/Secret-ban-on-face-veils-for-staff-at-17-hospitals.html>

29. It can only be concluded therefore that the ongoing media coverage relating to Muslims and Islam will continue to result in the consequences set out in point 11 above.