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# Media Portrayals of Minorities: Muslims in British Newspaper Headlines, 2001–2012

Erik Bleich, Hannah Stonebraker, Hasher Nisar and Rana Abdelhamid

*To better understand the public portrayal of minorities, we propose a new and systematic procedure for measuring the standing of different groups that relies on the tone of daily newspaper headlines containing the names of minority groups. This paper assesses the portrayal of Muslims in the British print media between 2001 and 2012, focusing especially on testing scholarly propositions that Muslims are depicted in a systematically negative way. We compare the tone of newspaper headlines across time and across newspaper type and compare the portrayal of Muslims to that of Jews and Christians. We do not find support for arguments that Muslims are consistently portrayed in a negative manner in the British media as a whole. However, our data demonstrate that headlines in right-leaning newspapers are more negative than those in left-leaning newspapers, and that Muslims are consistently portrayed more negatively than Jews and frequently more negatively than Christians. These findings thus offer a more nuanced understanding of British newspaper portrayals of Muslims than exists in the contemporary scholarly literature.*

*Keywords: Muslims; Media; Britain; Headlines; Religion*

Public perceptions of different identity groups affect not only minorities, but also societies that have a stake in promoting equality and social cohesion. Opinion polls have long been the primary means of gauging sentiments about different social groups. Yet such surveys are only conducted sporadically and they seldom use a comparable set of questions, limiting their usefulness for comparing across time, space or minority group. To complement the knowledge that can be gleaned from

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survey data, we propose using media analysis to measure the status of different identity groups. Because the media both reflect and reinforce public perceptions about social groups and because they are produced and recorded on a daily basis media portrayals of minorities offer a unique opportunity to track sentiment towards groups over time, across geographic locations and in comparison to one another.

This article demonstrates the usefulness of this approach by examining the portrayal of Muslims in the British print media between 2001 and 2012. Since the late 1980s, Muslims have been the topic of frequent public discussion in Western Europe, where they are often viewed as social outsiders separated from non-Muslims by 'bright' boundaries, with their religion seen to function as a 'barrier' to inclusion (Alba 2005; Foner and Alba 2008; Zolberg and Long 1999). Given the intense interest in the status of Muslims in Europe, it is not surprising that a large body of scholarship has emerged on media portrayals of Muslims. Scholars of Britain have been especially interested in this issue, and they have largely concluded that British newspapers in particular tend to depict Muslims in a negative light (Greenberg and Miazhevich 2012; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008; Richardson 2004). However, this scholarship also contains a number of limitations that create uncertainty about the reliability of these findings. Many of these studies offer qualitative interpretations that sceptics may challenge (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Richardson 2004; Saeed 2007). Some of the best-known quantitative studies were undertaken by a single coder, rather than through a more reliable process that relies on multiple coders (Poole 2002; Poole and Richardson 2006). Finally, none of the studies including the most rigorous and systematic ones (Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013; Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008) compares the portrayal of Muslims to that of analogous identity groups, raising questions about whether negative media portrayals are specific to Muslims or are simply a reflection of the news media's well-established propensity to focus on conflicts and problems (Gans 1979; Shoemaker and Cohen 2006).

We seek to overcome these limitations by assessing the tone of a systematic sample of daily newspaper headlines. We focus on headlines because, while most news consumers do not read most articles, media studies have demonstrated that even casual readers are drawn to headlines, which thus serve as cognitive shortcuts that impact a large number of readers (Andrew 2007). Tracking the tone of headlines allows us to understand how groups are portrayed, as well as whether the portrayals have shifted over time. We also introduce two comparative dimensions into our study. We sample headlines from four different types of newspapers: left-leaning broadsheets, right-leaning broadsheets, left-leaning tabloids and right-leaning tabloids. This allows us to assess the effect of political leaning and paper format on the portrayal of minorities in the British press. In addition, we examine headlines about Jews and Christians from the same time period and from the same array of newspapers. These groups provide reference points that allow us to understand more clearly how Muslims are portrayed relative to analogous groups.

Our evidence leads us to three core findings. First, British press headlines do not portray Muslims in a consistently or uniformly negative light. During the majority of years between 2001 and 2012, there were more positive than negative headlines about Muslims in our sample. At the same time, two observations temper these findings. Headlines in the most widely read paper in our sample (the right-leaning tabloid) were notably more negative than those from the lowest-circulating paper (the left-leaning broadsheet). The largest audience has thus been exposed to headlines that were more negative than the average headline. In addition, juxtaposing the tone of headlines about Muslims to those about Jews and Christians reveals that Muslims are systematically portrayed more negatively than those comparable groups. Our findings thus nuance the widespread scholarly assertion that Muslims are typically cast in a predominantly negative light by the British media. At the same time, they lend empirical support to intuitions about the effects of newspaper type on headline tone, and about the more negative media depiction of Muslims relative to other ethno-religious groups in British society.

To elaborate our argument, the following section reviews the existing literature on media coverage of minorities, deriving propositions about British newspaper coverage of Muslims that we can test with our data. The next section discusses the methodology of focusing on headlines and explains our definitions of media frames and of headline tone. The subsequent section lays out our findings by providing data on the frequency of headlines mentioning Muslims, the frequency of different frames and tone associated with these headlines, the comparison of tone in different types of newspapers and the comparison of headlines about Muslims, Jews and Christians. The final section concludes by summarising our arguments and by suggesting avenues for further research.

### **The Media and Minorities: Theories and Hypotheses**

The media have been shown to have significant effects on real-world outcomes with respect to minority issues, such as individual attitudes, voting intentions and political party agendas (Andrew 2007; Azrout, van Spanje, and de Vreese 2012; Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2007, 2009; Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Kellstedt 2000). Numerous scholars have also examined how the media portray minorities or cover cognate issues such as immigration (Bail 2012; Benson 2013; Benson and Saguy 2005; Cottle 2000; Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 2013; van Dijk 1991). Moreover, in recent years, studies have focused increasing attention on Muslims in the media, and in the British media in particular (Baker 2010; Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013; Dolezal, Helbling, and Hutter 2010; Greenberg and Miazhevich 2012; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008; Morey and Yaqin 2011; Poole 2002; Poole and Richardson 2006; Richardson 2004).

In this paper, we draw on this wide range of research to examine and assess arguments related to media portrayals of Muslims in Britain. Such scholarship focuses on the *tone* with which the media have portrayed Muslims, defined for our

purposes as the positive or negative valence of media coverage. The core discussion revolves around the extent to which Muslims are systematically associated with problems such as terrorism, antisocial behaviour, crime, economic threats or sociocultural incompatibility. Several studies have identified patterns of negative portrayals of Muslims and Islam in Britain and elsewhere. As early as 1981, Edward Said (1981) asserted that the media portrayed Muslims and Islam in a disparaging light in its coverage of the Iranian Revolution. Launching the contemporary discussion, the landmark 1997 Runnymede Trust report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* argued that the British media were marbled with closed views on Islam that were largely unfavourable (Runnymede Trust 1997, 20–30).

Through coding hundreds of British newspaper articles covering Muslims in the mid-1990s, Poole (2002) found that, with some variation, Islam and Muslims were portrayed in a predominately negative light. Moore, Mason, and Lewis (2008) used a similar quantitative approach to analyse stories from 2000 to 2008, finding that ‘the bulk of coverage of British Muslims—around two thirds—focuses on Muslims as a threat ... a problem ... or both ...’ (Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008, 3). Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery (2013) deploy corpus linguistics to review over a decade of newsprint articles containing references to Muslims or Islam. They find relatively few instances of extremely hostile coverage, yet argue that the media convey a subtle and ambiguous picture that ‘indirectly contributes to negative stereotypes’ (Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013, 255). Using qualitative rather than quantitative analyses, a large number of scholars—Richardson (2004), Saeed (2007), Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010), Morey and Yaqin (2011, ch. 2), among others—have argued that Muslims are portrayed negatively in the British press. In addition, Greenberg and Miazhevich (2012) found largely negative portrayals of British Muslims in the American press. These results are echoed in the studies of the portrayal of Muslims in the media in the USA and in other liberal democracies (Kabir 2006; Poole and Richardson 2006; Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007). Given the strength and consistency of these findings across time and space, we expect to find that headlines portray Muslims and Islam in a negative light.<sup>1</sup>

To gain a full picture of media portrayals of Muslims, we explore not only the tone of headlines across all of our newspapers taken together, but also the tone of headlines across different media outlets. In particular, we address the proposition that coverage differs between left- and right-leaning newspapers, as well as between broadsheets and tabloids. Researchers who have previously engaged these questions have identified complex relationships. Poole (2002, 247–249) found that while coverage of Muslims across newspaper types was not homogenous, there was little difference across broadsheets of different political leanings, a somewhat more negative tone in the tabloid as compared to the broadsheets, and an ‘increasing tabloidisation’ of the press that implied convergence over time. Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery (2013, esp. ch. 3) identified differences in the most and least common words used in different types of newspapers regarding a variety of topics related to Muslims, thus demonstrating that the British news media are hardly monolithic.

We use our data to test the propositions that left-leaning papers and broadsheets are likely to contain more positive headlines compared, respectively, to right-leaning papers and tabloids.

We also investigate how Muslims are depicted compared to analogous religious groups. Some critics of media portrayal studies note that because the media gravitate towards negative stories, it is only possible to grasp whether Muslims are depicted negatively if their portrayals are compared to those of other groups. We selected Jews because, like Muslims, they are a religious minority in Britain that receives a substantial amount of coverage in newspaper headlines.<sup>2</sup> According to data from the 2011 census of England and Wales, Jews comprise 0.5% of the population, whereas Muslims make up 4.8% of the residents (up from 3% in 2001). Christians, by contrast, are a majority group, with 59.3% of the population self-identifying as Christian in the 2011 census (down from 71.7% in 2001, and compared to 25.1% of residents of England and Wales who self-identified as having ‘no religion’ in 2011).<sup>3</sup> Portrayals of Christians represent a baseline against which those of status minority groups can be assessed. If the media systematically gravitate towards stories about problems, this will also be visible in portrayals of the status majority group. If all three groups are depicted negatively, then arguments that Muslims are especially stigmatised fall flat. Evidence that Christians or Jews are portrayed more positively than Muslims, by contrast, supports the *prima facie* argument that there is something distinctive and negative about how Muslims are portrayed. Together, these cross-paper and cross-group comparisons allow us to check for nuances in our first-level findings about media portrayals of Muslims in Britain.

## Methodology

We focus on headlines rather than full news stories for several reasons. Headlines serve as cognitive shortcuts that draw readers’ attention on the printed page more than other text and are thus highly influential relative to the full transcript of an article (Andrew 2007; Dor 2003; Leckner 2012, 169). They are also particularly likely to influence readers who do not already have strong opinions about a topic. Knowledgeable or ‘engaged’ readers are more likely than average to read the full article on a topic of interest, but because of confirmation bias, they are less likely than average to be swayed by the tone of the article. By contrast, ‘non-engaged’ readers—those who do not have strong preconceived notions about an issue—are more likely to read only the headline and are more likely to be influenced by its tone.<sup>4</sup>

The relevance of headlines is magnified by the fact that they are composed by editors rather than by reporters. Dor (2003, 714) explains that newspaper editors seek to attract readers to stories while still tapping into their ‘prior expectations and assumptions’. Headlines are thus crafted by non-specialist editors with non-specialist readers in mind and are consequently more likely to reflect prevailing societal beliefs than are full-text articles. Moreover, they differ in significant ways from the full text of the article and have an independent impact on readers’ perceptions of events

(Althaus, Edy, and Phalen 2001; Andrew 2007; Dor 2003; Ifantidou 2009). Although it offers distinct advantages, we do not argue that focusing on headlines is sufficient for understanding media portrayals of minorities. While headlines help structure readers' interpretation of the subsequent text, they do not determine it (León 1997). Moreover, some studies have found that headlines are frequently incomplete or ambiguous summaries of the article that follows, and that readers often bring their own ad hoc interpretive schemas to bear when interpreting them (Ifantidou 2009). Yet, because far more media consumers read headlines than full-text articles (Dor 2003)—especially in the Internet era when they are tweeted and shared by millions of people daily<sup>5</sup>—by analysing headlines instead of full articles, we are able to efficiently tap into a data-set that both reflects and influences common perceptions about identity groups.

Our study utilises headlines from four major British papers, selected to represent a spectrum of the newspaper industry, which (combining print and online formats) reaches approximately 82% of British adults aged 15 or older.<sup>6</sup> British newspapers are frequently identified as either broadsheets or tabloids, with broadsheets having more words per article, more coverage of international news and politics (as opposed to stories about celebrities, sports and entertainment found in greater numbers in tabloids), a more formal writing style and appealing to a more educated as opposed to working-class audience (Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013, 6–7). The *Guardian* (and its Sunday equivalent, the *Observer*) is a left-leaning broadsheet; the *Daily Telegraph* is a right-leaning broadsheet. The *Daily Mirror* is a left-leaning tabloid, and the *Daily Mail* is a right-leaning tabloid (Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013, 9).<sup>7</sup> We selected Britain as a location because of the large previous body of work on Muslims within the country and its media, and also because it contained numerous nationally circulating newspapers that vary across relevant newspaper type.

From each of these papers (and their Sunday equivalents) we used LexisNexis to extract all headlines from 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2012 containing the words 'Muslim!/Moslem!' and 'Islam!'; 'Jew!' and 'Judai!'; and 'Christian!', with the exclamation point serving to capture the root plus all words with any number of letters following the root. We believe this list comprises the core words that are unambiguously related to each faith group (i.e., Muslim, Muslims, Islam, Islamic, Islamist, Islamophobia, Jew, Jews, Jewish, Judaism, Judaic, Judaica, Christian, Christians, Christianity). We elected to exclude other terms that have strong associations with each religious group, such as mosque, imam, Koran, Yom Kippur, star of David, Jesus, Bible, etc. Including such terms would raise concerns that some readers would not associate these less-central terms with the religious group, and it would create uncertainty over how to draw the boundaries around which terms should be included and excluded.

Our time frame was determined by the earliest available 1 January start date for all four newspapers. After removing duplicate headlines and accidental inclusions (e.g., Islamabad, the first name Christian, etc.), our search parameters yielded a total of 5501 headlines about Muslims, 1599 about Jews and 1813 about Christians. We used

a systematic sampling technique, analysing every eighth headline organised chronologically by newspaper, so that the frequency of sampled headlines reflected the overall frequency of headlines containing our keywords distributed proportionally by newspaper. Our final sample contained 685 headlines about Muslims, 198 about Jews and 225 about Christians.

Each of the headlines was coded by two coders. Where coders agreed, we retained the code for the headline. Where they disagreed, the conflicting code was resolved through a team meeting. This process reduced miscoding due to typographical errors and coder fatigue. If there were residual disagreements among team members at this stage, the headline was classified as ‘too ambiguous to code’. Although this process was labour-intensive and generated a higher percentage of ‘ambiguous’ category results, it also produced more reliable data than a methodology involving coding by a single coder.

Our primary dependent variable in this analysis is the headline frame.<sup>8</sup> Using a coding scheme adapted from Benson (2013), each headline was coded in one of five frame categories: victim, beneficial, problem, other and ambiguous. The first three of these categories have either a positive or negative tone. We follow Benson (2013, 7) in identifying the tone based on the feelings that different frames are likely to elicit. Although some scholars have suggested that victim frames may cast groups as lacking agency, Benson (2013, 7) has argued convincingly that they are more aptly identified as having a positive tone because they tend to generate sympathy for the victim group. Beneficial frames have a positive tone in portraying groups as contributing to society, thus generating support for the group. Problem frames have a negative tone because they evoke fear or animosity. To provide a sense of each of the content of the three categories, the following are examples of headlines coded with different tones:

#### *Victim*

- Muslim moderates ‘face hate campaign’
- Rise in attacks on the Jewish
- Christians live in dread as new, local Taliban rises in the north

#### *Beneficial*

- Muslim groups draw up rules to fight extremists and allow women’s rights
- The great British chippie is all thanks to sixteenth-century Jewish immigrants
- Christian brother gives new life to forgotten children of Belarus

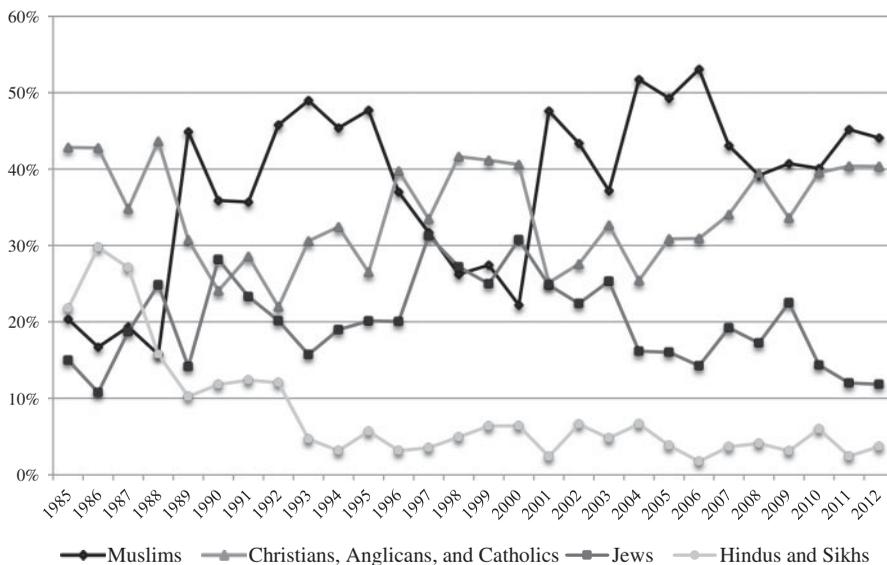
#### *Problem*

- US Muslim sect suspected of ‘executing’ newspaper editor
- Prodi irritated by Jewish criticism
- The cruel Christian; this ex-preacher fractured his baby’s skull because the tot wouldn’t take Calpol

The *other* category captures headlines that have a frame that is neither positive nor negative, such as those that identify a group as distinctive without ascribing a valence to it ('Let's shed more light on Islam'). The *ambiguous* category includes headlines that are too unclear to code ('Cam's claim is slammed; Islam'), those where readers could interpret it as having either a positive or a negative tone ('Islam group drops troop town march') and those where positive and negative elements make the headline internally contradictory and thus do not contain a clear valence ('Both Muslim boys, born in the same year. One died serving his country ... the other died trying to destroy it').

### Describing and Explaining the Tone of Coverage

Before examining the tone of media coverage, it is useful to provide an overview of the raw frequency of headlines related to Muslims compared to a wide variety of other groups over a longer time period. This step situates our analysis in a broader context and allows us to understand the ways in which coverage of Muslims has been distinctive over the course of decades. To measure longer-term trends in coverage of different religious groups, we assembled 8486 *Guardian* headlines from 1985 to 2012 that named one of the following groups: Muslims, Christians, Anglicans, Catholics, Jews, Sikhs or Hindus. We chose the *Guardian* because its data are available earlier than those from any other newspaper in our sample and selected 1985 because it provides a set of four years as a baseline comparison before the 1989 Rushdie Affair generated systematic national attention towards Muslims in Great Britain. During

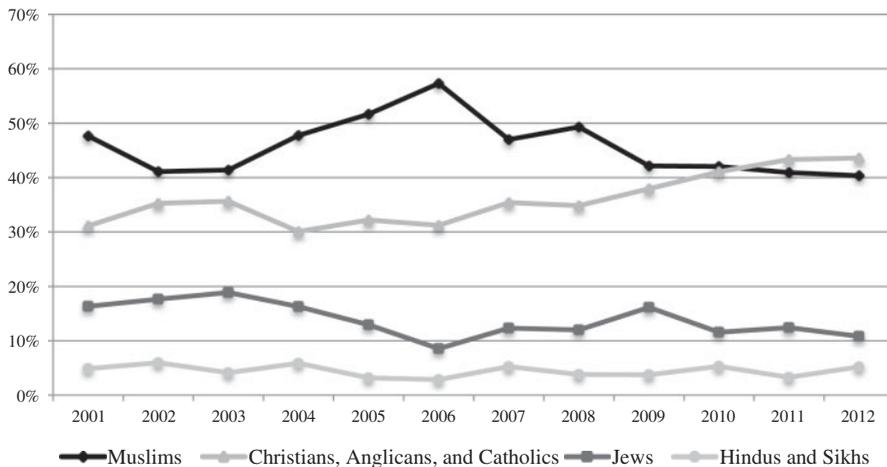


**Figure 1.** Annual percentage of headlines naming prominent religious groups ( $n = 8486$ ; *Guardian*).

this 28-year period, Muslims were named in 3306 headlines, more than twice the 1644 headlines that named Jews, and even more than the sum of Christians, Anglicans and Catholics, which together appeared in 2883 headlines. Comparing the percentage of *Guardian* headlines annually across the groups shows that Muslims were consistently the most covered group between 1989 and 1995 and again from 2001 to 2012 (Figure 1). In several years, approximately 50% of all headlines in our pool of headlines covering minority groups named Muslims or Islam. These data illustrate that the 2001–2012 time period is one of high coverage of Muslims, but that it is less distinct from other time periods than might be presumed.

Examining headlines about the same seven groups between 2001 and 2012 in all of our newspapers—the *Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail* (and their Sunday equivalents)—shows that the disproportionate pattern of headline exposure is not limited to just one newspaper. Of the 11,838 total headlines, 5501 (46%) contained the words Muslims or Islam. The next most frequent coverage was of Christians, named in 1808 headlines (15%). Adding together the Christian, Catholic and Anglican categories amounts to 4216 headlines, or 36% of the total. Jews were named in 1599 headlines (14%). Looking at the pattern across time shows that Muslims accounted for at least 40% of all headlines in each year from 2001 to 2012 across the four newspapers (Figure 2).

Given that Muslims made up only 4.8% of the population of England and Wales in 2011,<sup>9</sup> these two sets of data clearly demonstrate the out-sized media attention devoted to Muslims compared to other groups. It is possible that simple coverage of Muslims may correlate with negative attitudes towards them as a group, as scholars have found that coverage of immigration correlates with individuals' intention to vote for anti-immigrant parties (Boomgaarden and Vliegthart 2007). However, more recent research by the same scholars suggests that it is the *tone* rather than the



**Figure 2.** Annual percentage of headlines naming prominent religious groups ( $n = 11,838$ ; all surveyed newspapers).

**Table 1.** Frame categories, 2001–2012 (Muslims).

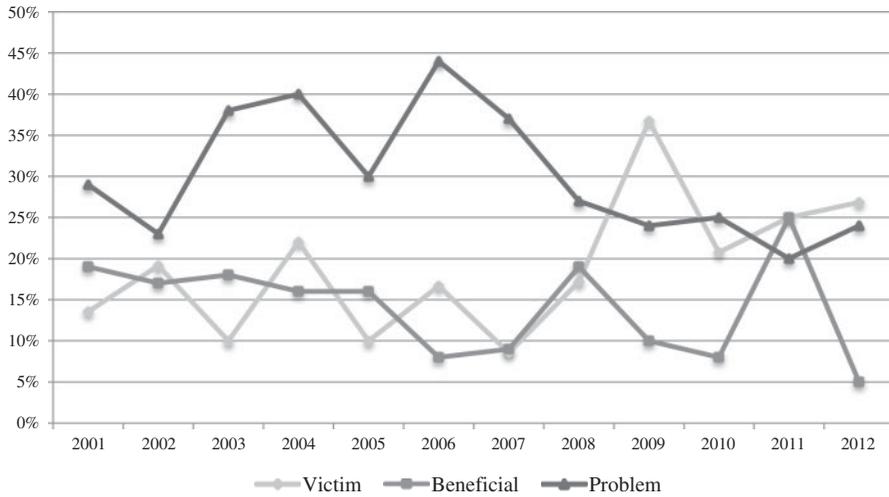
	Frame count	%
Victim	123	18
Beneficial	92	13
Sum victim + beneficial	215	31
Problem	215	31
Other	53	8
Ambiguous	202	29
Total	685	

straightforward *amount* of coverage that has a greater impact on anti-group attitudes (Boomgaarden and Vliegthart 2009).

Table 1 summarises the distribution of frames among our sample of 685 headlines about Muslims from January 2001 through December 2012. Before discussing the frames with a positive or negative tone, it is worth noting that the second most common frame category is ‘ambiguous’. Our coding scheme for ambiguous included any headline that was impossible to decipher, but it also included headlines that could be read as positive *or* negative, as well as headlines that included positive *and* negative elements. The frequency of ambiguous headlines is not necessarily surprising, and it is important to note that psychological processes like confirmation bias may encourage ‘engaged’ readers to interpret such open-ended headlines as reinforcing their pre-existing positive or negative views about a group (Ifantidou 2009). If this is true, then these types of headlines may have a substantial effect on different subsets of readers. Our research cannot reveal the extent of this effect, but it does highlight the need to conduct additional research that uses experimental techniques to understand how ambiguous headlines are interpreted by different categories of readers.

Turning to our analysis of headlines with a tone, the single most common frame among the five categories is the negatively toned problem frame, which was present in 215 headlines. This seems to suggest the plausibility of the view that Muslims are most commonly portrayed in a negative light. However, victim and beneficial frames both have a positive tone, as they are likely to elicit sympathy or warm feelings for Muslims. Adding victim and beneficial frames together shows that there were 215 headlines with a positive tone. In short, there were an equal number of headlines containing positive and negative tones.

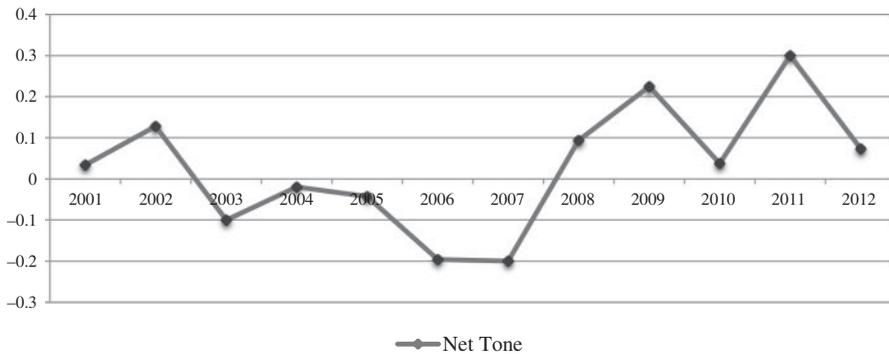
Looking at patterns over time in terms of the annual percentage of frames in each category from 2001 to 2012 shows that problem frames were found in a higher percentage of headlines than either victim or beneficial frames between 2001 and 2008 and in 2010, during which time newspaper consumers would more likely read a headline such as ‘Islamic agitators try to lure youngsters into terror camps’ than ‘Muslim neighbours “face backlash of distrust”’ or ‘Lot to learn from Islam’. But in 2009, 2011 and 2012, victim frames made up a greater percentage of the total than



**Figure 3.** Annual percentage of headlines containing frames with a positive or negative tone ( $n = 685$ ; Muslims).

problem frames, and in 2011, beneficial frames also constituted a larger percentage than problem frames (Figure 3).

To more succinctly convey the patterns in the tone of the coverage over time, it is useful to focus attention uniquely on the types of frames that have a positive or a negative valence. Subtracting the percentage of all headlines with a negative tone from the percentage of all headlines with a positive tone, we are able to produce an index of the tone of headlines that can range from +1 to -1 (Figure 4). The greater the ratio of positive headlines to negative headlines, the higher the number will be above 0. Numbers below the 0 line reflect a net negative tone of portrayals across all headlines in our sample for a given year.



**Figure 4.** Annual net tone of headline frames ( $n = 685$ ; Muslims).

There were five years where negative portrayals of Muslims outweighed positive portrayals in our sample of 685 British newspaper headlines, while there were seven years where the tone of headline coverage was net positive. Taken as a whole, British media headlines in our sample do not consistently portray Muslims and Islam negatively. Our data demonstrate that the patterns of coverage are complex and that they vary year by year. Overall, however, British media headlines are relatively evenly balanced between portraying Muslims in a positive and negative light.<sup>10</sup> This finding thus contradicts prevailing views about portrayals of Muslims in the British media that emphasise systematically negative tendencies. Our methodology gives us greater confidence in our results than in those of many previous studies, although it is important to note that our unit of analysis is the article headline, which may differ from the full article text. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between headlines and full articles in order to determine if there is a consistent relationship between their respective tones.

In order to understand the portrayal of Muslims in British headlines at a deeper level, we examine the data through two additional lenses. First, the distribution of our 685 frames is partly a function of the number of stories appearing in each of the four newspapers (plus Sunday equivalents). There are many more headlines containing the root words Muslim and Islam in left-leaning broadsheets (the *Guardian* and the *Observer*) than there are in any other category of newspaper. As a percentage of total headlines per paper, left-leaning broadsheets also contain more positively and fewer negatively toned portrayals than those of other categories of newspapers. As Table 2 illustrates, the net tone of headlines about Muslims is positive in left-leaning papers and negative in right-leaning papers. Our data thus lend strong empirical support to the intuition that different types of newspapers portray Muslims in strikingly divergent ways.

If the newspapers in our sample had equivalent readerships, the net tone of coverage would be adequately captured via the data presented in Figure 4. However,

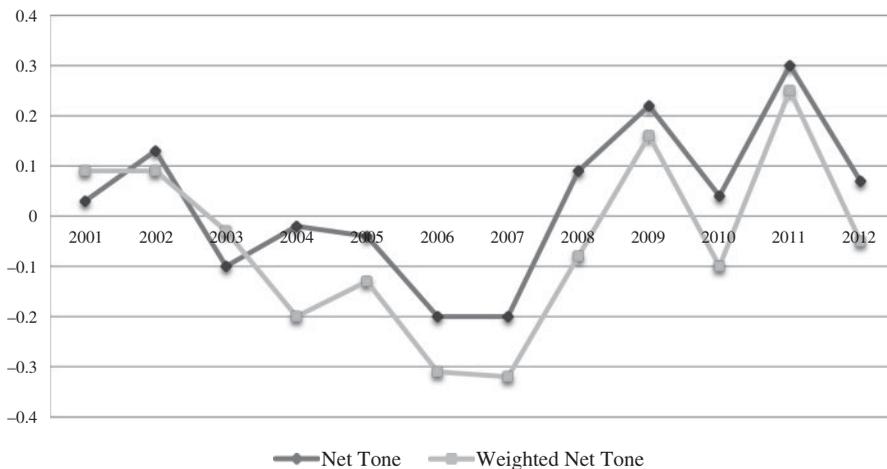
**Table 2.** Headline frames and net tone by paper type ( $n = 685$ ; Muslims).

	<u>Left broadsheet</u>		<u>Left tabloid</u>		<u>Right broadsheet</u>		<u>Right tabloid</u>	
	Frame count	%	Frame count	%	Frame count	%	Frame count	%
Positive tone	122	40	30	39	42	22	21	18
Victim	68	22	19	25	26	14	10	9
Beneficial	54	18	11	14	16	9	11	9
Negative tone/problem	67	22	23	30	74	40	51	44
Net tone		+.18		+.09		-.18		-.26
Other	33	11	2	3	12	6	6	5
Ambiguous	83	27	21	28	59	32	39	33
Total	305		76		187		117	

average readership numbers are not equivalent across our four paper types. Using January 2007 circulation figures (as an approximate average across our 12 years of data), the *Guardian* reached 380,000 readers, the *Daily Telegraph* 910,000 readers, the *Daily Mirror* 1.62 million readers and the *Daily Mail* 2.35 million readers.<sup>11</sup>

These circulation figures suggest that although *Guardian* readers view the greatest number and the most positive set of headlines depicting Muslims, fewer people are exposed to them. The more than twice as numerous *Daily Telegraph* readers see only approximately 60% of the number of headlines about Muslims as *Guardian* readers, but those headlines are much more likely to be negative than positive. The relatively large number of *Daily Mirror* readers view headlines that are net positive towards Muslims, but they see many fewer headlines than readers of any other paper in our sample. Finally, *Daily Mail* readers are the most numerous in our sample, so headlines in that paper impact the largest number of readers. These headlines, while not extremely common, are distinctly negative. In short, if we are interested not only in the total number of headlines, but also in the total number of people reading those headlines, the largest number of consumers of newspapers sampled in our study has been exposed to net negative headlines rather than to net positive ones.

To capture the effect of cross-paper differences, we analyse the data by weighting each headline in proportion to newspaper circulation.<sup>12</sup> Figure 5 shows that taking into account the more negative tone and greater readerships of the right-leaning newspapers compared to their left-leaning counterparts shifts the net tone in a negative direction in 10 of 12 years between 2001 and 2012. The effect is not only consistent, but it is also substantively significant. Across all 12 years, the average shift in net tone is  $-8\%$ . Moreover, by this measure, there were only four years of headlines with a net positive tone, whereas there were eight years where the net tone was negative.



**Figure 5.** Annual net tone of weighted and unweighted headline frames ( $n = 685$ ; Muslims).

Using weighted figures provides some support for an argument that large numbers of British readers have been exposed to primarily negative portrayals of Muslims. At the same time, it is not true that the majority of newspaper headlines portray Muslims in a negative light; rather it is true that the plurality of high-circulating right-leaning newspaper headlines in our sample does so. In addition, even using weighted data, headlines are not uniformly negative. In one-third of the years in our study, headlines remained net positive. Adjusting for readership is thus an important additional way to interpret the data, but it does not demonstrate that headlines are consistently or overwhelmingly negative.

Our second additional analytical lens concerns how depictions of Muslims compare to those of analogous groups. Knowing whether Muslims are portrayed positively or negatively depends not only on raw counts of headline frames or on unweighted or weighted measures of net tone, but also on understanding where Muslims stand on a national ethno-racial or ethno-religious status hierarchy (Bleich 2009). Exploring the relative status of different groups in this manner parallels longstanding efforts of social scientists that have deployed Bogardus social distance scales (Parrillo and Donoghue 2005), or who utilise feeling thermometers to understand the rankings of different identity groups (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996). Yet such methods have rarely been used in media studies. If portrayals of Muslims in newspaper headlines are similar to those of comparable groups, there is little reason to believe Muslims are unduly stigmatised. On the other hand, if depictions of Muslims are systematically more negative than those of analogous groups, it may constitute evidence that Muslims have a lower status.

Focusing on Jews and Christians allows us to compare Muslims to another prominent minority group as well as to the identity group that constitutes the majority of British society. Because these two groups are named frequently in headlines, selecting them also permits the most reliable comparison possible. Using our systematic sampling strategy of examining every eighth headline from each newspaper, we coded 198 headlines about Jews and 225 about Christians in the four newspapers (plus Sunday equivalents) between 1 January 2001 and 31 December

**Table 3.** Headline frames and net tone for three groups, 2001–2012 (*n* = 1108).

	Jews		Christians		Muslims	
	Frame count	%	Frame count	%	Frame count	%
Positive tone	102	52	81	36	215	31
Victim	75	38	53	24	123	18
Beneficial	27	14	28	12	92	13
Negative tone/problem	4	2	30	13	215	31
Net tone		+.50		+.23		0
Other	11	6	13	6	53	8
Ambiguous	81	41	101	45	202	29
Total	198		225		685	

2012. We applied the same coding rules to headlines about these two groups as we applied to headlines about Muslims. The results of the analysis are provided in Table 3.

It is worth noting the much larger percentage of ‘ambiguous’ headlines about Jews and Christians. Readers are thus exposed to fewer toned messages about Jews and Christians: these groups are simply not as frequently identified in either positive or negative terms compared to Muslims, who elicited a clearer valence in the headlines we examined. Perhaps surprisingly, the percentage of beneficial frames was similar across the three groups. On the whole, newspaper consumers were as likely to come across headlines like ‘Muslims may lead the way’ as they were ones such as ‘Britain’s debt to its Jewish statesman’ or ‘Christians plan ring of prayer to protect Occupy London camp’.<sup>13</sup> Headlines thus characterised Muslims as beneficial to society in similar proportions to comparable groups.

There are, however, substantial differences in the percentage of victim and problem frames across the three groups. Jews are very infrequently identified as posing societal problems, and when they are, it tends to be based on events that take place outside of British borders, such as in the headline ‘Defiant Jews prepare for West Bank showdown’.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, headlines about Jews frequently contain a victim frame. A significant number of these are historical references to Nazism or the Holocaust, but a large number are also about contemporary anti-Semitism both at home and abroad, like ‘In brief: Jewish graves vandalised’.<sup>15</sup> Headlines about Christians as victims tend to be about repression of Christians around the world (such as in Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan or China) or about unfair treatment of Christians in Britain, such as ‘BBC admits to anti-Christian bias’.<sup>16</sup> When Christians are framed as a problem, it tends to be because their religious stances are deemed incompatible with other important

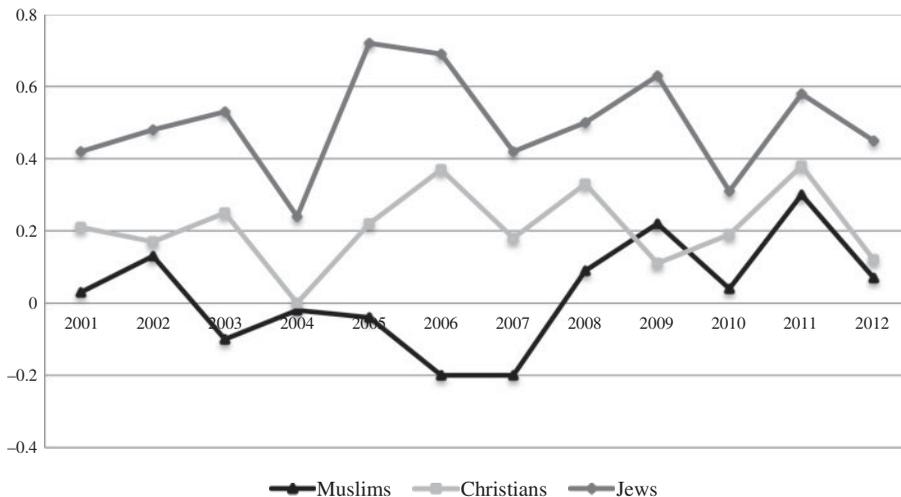


Figure 6. Annual net tone of headline frames ( $n = 1108$ ; three groups).

societal values, as in the headline ‘Christians to unite against Equality Bill’,<sup>17</sup> or ‘Here come the brides: Lesbians defy Christian protests to exchange vows in historic ceremony’.<sup>18</sup>

Given these differences in the percentages of victim and problem frames, the average net tone identified in [Table 3](#) is substantially more positive for Jews (+.50) and Christians (+.23) than for Muslims (0). This difference holds overall, and also on an annual basis ([Figure 6](#)). There is only one year in which the net tone of headlines about Muslims is more positive than the net tone about Christians, and no years where it is more positive than the net tone about Jews. Neither Jews nor Christians are depicted net negatively in any year between 2001 and 2012. While the net tone for Muslims ranges between  $-$ .20 and +.30, the net tone for Christians falls between 0 and +.38, while for Jews it is between +.24 and +.72.

These results show that the net tone of headlines about Muslims is consistently more negative than it is for comparable identity groups. Yet interpreting these findings is not straightforward. It is possible that coverage of Muslims is a function of politicised debates about integration (e.g., issues of veiling, free speech and religion in schools) or of terrorism associated with self-declared Islamists. From this perspective, journalists’ choices about how to frame groups in media headlines are largely functions of real-world developments. At the same time, there are reasons to doubt this explanation. These doubts are grounded in scholarship on the gatekeeping function of journalists, which has identified common disjunctions between the ‘real world’ and media coverage of events (Soroka 2012; Vliegthart and Boomgaarden 2007). In addition, the extremely low number of problem frames with respect to Jews (particularly British Jews) and the relatively large number of headlines framing Christians as victims (especially within Britain) are more likely related to journalistic preferences and conventions than direct reflections of objective social reality. Our data cannot resolve this debate. But by providing information about the net tone of multiple social groups, we raise questions for future inquiry that extend beyond those identified by research that relies on studying Muslims alone.

## Conclusions

More readers glance at headlines than read full articles in any newspaper. This is particularly true of readers who are not especially interested in a topic. Such ‘non-engaged’ media consumers are most prone to being influenced by the tone of a headline, as they lack the stronger confirmation bias of ‘engaged’ readers. Moreover, editors who compose headlines cannot typically convey nuances found in the full article, but rather strive to capture the attention of readers by tapping into prevailing tropes about a subject. In short, headlines both affect and reflect public perceptions of a topic and are particularly likely to influence readers who are most susceptible to having their views shifted by what they read on a topic with which they are unfamiliar. Analysing newspaper headlines about identity groups is thus a valuable tool for gauging the portrayals and perceptions of groups in public discourse that can

supplement media studies that focus on full-text articles as well as public opinion polls.

In this paper, we applied headline analysis to portrayals of Muslims in British newspapers from 2001 to 2012. We assessed the widespread argument that the British media consistently depicted Muslims in a negative light. Our data do not support this proposition in its most straightforward form. Examining the data across the entire time period, there were equal numbers of positive and negative headlines in our four newspaper types. There were years where headline portrayals were net negative, but there were more years where they were net positive. Adjusting for the relative circulation of the newspapers in our sample, however, there were more years where the weighted headline tone was net negative than net positive. These facts suggest that portrayals of Muslims in the British print media are more complex than prevailing scholarly or popular views suggest.

Our data also reveal several systematic findings that offer a more detailed understanding of how Muslims are depicted in British newspapers. Examining different types of newspapers demonstrates that right-leaning papers are substantially more likely to contain headlines with a net negative tone than their left-leaning counterparts. This suggests that editorial outlooks and consumer preferences have a meaningful influence on the way different groups are portrayed across media outlets. Juxtaposing headlines about Muslims with those about Jews and Christians demonstrates systematic differences in the portrayal of comparable ethno-religious groups. While this finding does not allow us to conclude that newspapers portray Muslims in an unfavourable light overall, it makes clear that Muslims are depicted in a substantially more negative way when compared to analogous groups.

Our results suggest that using newspaper data as a barometer of public sentiment towards social groups can be a valuable tool for scholarly analysis. We have applied it to portrayals of Muslims in British newspapers from 2001 to 2012, but the procedure and methodology can be extended to different time periods, additional newspapers and to multiple countries. Moreover, comparing the tone of headlines about Muslims to that of headlines about Jews and Christians demonstrates that the analysis can be applied to a wide variety of religious, ethnic, racial or social groups. Once we have data across time, country, newspapers and social groups, we can test explanations for variation across these dimensions. This research thus serves as a fundamental building block for a deeper understanding of how groups are positioned on status hierarchies and of the factors that can affect those positions.

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## Notes

- [1] While not asserting that media portrayals of Muslims are positive, it is worth noting that some scholars have found that claims about Muslims in the British press are not largely negative (Carol and Koopmans 2013, 185; Vanparys, Jacobs, and Torreken 2013, 217), and that the type of Muslim voice represented in the British media as of the mid-2000s has gone 'beyond angry Muslims' (Meer, Dwyer, and Modood 2010).
- [2] Other recent immigrant groups such as Hindus or Sikhs are not covered frequently enough to permit reliable analysis.
- [3] Data from the Office of National Statistics: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-religion.html>, accessed 28 November 2014.
- [4] Chong and Druckman (2007, 120–121) draw a parallel distinction between 'citizens without sufficiently developed attitudes' who can be 'routinely manipulated by alternative framings' and 'citizens whose attitudes are held so tightly that they seek only to reinforce existing views'.
- [5] The CEO of the Newspaper Association of America notes that the *New York Times* tweets its headlines to 9.5 million followers. See <http://www.jsonline.com/news/opinion/news-papers-more-relevant-than-ever-before-b99112179z1-226211941.html>, accessed 1 December 2014.
- [6] Statistics from the National Readership Survey, available at <http://www.nrs.co.uk/>, accessed 28 November 2014.
- [7] Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery (2013, 7) note that some refer to the *Daily Mail* as a 'middle-market' paper because it has longer articles, more coverage of politics and a more formal writing style than other tabloids. At the same time, they argue that it has a "'tabloid" world view'.
- [8] Each headline was also coded for the type of story (political, economic, cultural, etc.); whether or not it included elements of conflict or controversy; whether or not it was related to terrorism; whether or not it was related to women's issues; and for the geographic location associated with the headline.
- [9] Data from the Office of National Statistics: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-religion.html>, accessed 28 November 2014.
- [10] We analysed portrayals in stories about foreign and domestic Muslims in our data-set and found no statistically significant differences among them.
- [11] Data from the Audit Bureau of Circulations available at: <http://media.theguardian.com/presspublishing/table/0,,2012198,00.html>, accessed 28 November 2014. With the growth of online readership, another way to assess overall exposure is through data from the UK's National Readership Survey, which offers a combined estimate of print and online readership. According to this yardstick, in 2013, almost 12 million people read the *Daily Mail*, almost 8 million read the *Daily Mirror*, approximately 5.2 million read the *Guardian* and 4.9 million read the *Daily Telegraph* (all figures include Sunday equivalents: <http://>

- [www.pressgazette.co.uk/uk-newspapers-ranked-total-readership-print-and-online](http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/uk-newspapers-ranked-total-readership-print-and-online), accessed 28 November 2014). This means that readership for right-leaning newspapers (16.9 million total) outweighs that for left-leaning papers (13.2 million total) by approximately 3.7 million. However, without access to these data across all of the years in our study, and without being certain that the print and online headlines are precisely the same, we opted to use print circulation figures for our weighting analysis.
- [12] We used January 2007 circulation figures from the *Guardian* as a baseline and multiplied headline counts for other papers by the greater readership ratio that each paper had at the mid-point of our timeline. The *Daily Telegraph* readership was 2.4 times that of the *Guardian*; the *Daily Mirror* readership was 4.3 times greater; and the *Daily Mail* had 6.2 times as many readers as the *Guardian*.
- [13] *Daily Telegraph*, 8 September 2001; *Daily Telegraph*, 17 November 2003; *Guardian*, 30 October 2011.
- [14] *Daily Telegraph*, 23 August 2005.
- [15] *Guardian*, 2 December 2002.
- [16] *Mail on Sunday*, 22 October 2006.
- [17] *Daily Telegraph*, 23 January 2010.
- [18] *Daily Mirror*, 20 December 2005.

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