

**Julian Petley and Robin Richardson (Ed.)**

*Pointing the Finger: Islam and Muslims in the British Media.* Oxford: Oneworld, 2011.  
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One of the key features of the contemporary fear of Islam and Muslims in the West is that it has a very strong media dimension in a sense that the stereotypical images of Islam and Muslims have been largely diffused by the mass media. One of the most popular images of Islam shown by television, diffused by radio stations and Internet portals as well as depicted in newspapers, is the image of a Muslim fundamentalist, extremist and terrorist. At the same time, as numerous surveys of the public opinion show, television, radio and press are the main sources of information on Islam for the majority of people. In the United Kingdom, for example, where according to the latest census almost 3 million inhabitants are Muslims, 65 % of people learn about Islam from the media (YouGov 2002). That is why the book on Islam and Muslims in the British media edited by Julian Petley and Robin Richardson is a very timely one.

The book, which draws in part on a study conducted in 2006-2007 for the Greater London Council, starts with a theoretical introduction concerned with the key definitions and concepts. Its author Robin Richardson, who played a key role in drafting the Runnymede Trust's report on "Islamophobia: Challenge to Us All" (1997) and thus in the popularisation of the notion of Islamophobia, very skillfully traces the history of the usage of the term and analyses its possible alternatives including 'anti-Muslim racism' and 'intolerance'. He also provides a working definition of the term 'Islamophobia' pointing out the multifaceted mix of discourse, behaviours and structures which express and perpetuate feelings of anxiety, fear, hostility and rejection towards Muslims. While doing so, Richardson also sheds light on numerous advantages and disadvantages of the term pointed out by other authors (e.g. Allen 2010, Vakil 2008).

This brief but comprehensive theoretical introduction is followed by chapters of more empirical and analytical character. Chapter 2, also by Robin Richardson, points out and thoroughly analyses the most prevalent negative stereotypes related to Islam and Muslims that feature in the media narratives and in daily conversations in countries where Muslims live as minorities. They include the belief that all Muslims are the same, all are religiously motivated, all are seen as totally 'other', inferior and a threat, and as those with whom it is impossible to work with. He also aptly explores the most popular specific allegations made in the media about Muslims living in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, such as, inter alia, accusation of failure to integrate into the wider society; of making unreasonable demands upon European governments; owing their principal loyalty to the worldwide *Ummah* instead of countries

where they live; tacitly supporting and sympathising with Islamic extremism. These allegations are analysed further in the following chapters with examples from different media outlets.

One of the interesting findings of Justin Lewis, Paul Mason and Kerry Moore who have thoroughly analysed material on Muslims and Islam between 2000 and 2008 from the Nexis database of British newspapers is that the patterns of coverage of Muslim affairs are fairly consistent across the British press, and the most conspicuous news hooks (Muslim extremism and religious/cultural issues) are similar in both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. The researchers from the University of Cardiff have discovered that references to 'radical' Muslims in the British press outnumber references to 'moderate' Muslims by seventeen to one. They have also analysed the sources and imagery behind the information on Islam and Muslims. What could be expected, in an era when the Muslim community is a subject of ongoing political debate and in the context of significant increase in coverage of Muslim affairs after 2001, the dominant source for stories on Muslims is non-Muslim politicians while a significant proportion of images used in these stories are police mugshots that are images encoded with clear negative associations.

A book on the British media would be incomplete without the contribution of professional journalists. In Chapter 4 they carry out an in-depth analysis of selected sensational stories with Muslims or Islam as main characters which turn out to be nothing but pure inventions and fine examples of media misinformation. The volume analyses not only newspaper production with references to Muslims and Islam but also TV programmes. Julian Petley makes great use of the BBC Panorama episode on "Question of Leadership" to explore the relations between producers of the aforementioned TV programme and one of the major Muslim organisations in the country—the Muslim Council of Britain. The book also discusses extensively controversies related to government policies pertaining to promoting community cohesion, preventing violent extremism (PVE), and promoting British identity in the educational system and thus clearly goes beyond a limited exploration of the mediascape.

Amongst the most popular media subjects in Europe are Muslim women and Shari'a law. It is thus not surprising that *Pointing the Finger* also devotes a separate chapter to each of the topics. It shows that the press find it very difficult to discuss Muslim women without raising the question of the veil that is usually viewed one-dimensionally as a symbol of lack of freedom of Muslim women. The book also explores the affair around the lecture of the Archbishop of Canterbury on accommodation of Shari'a within secular civil law, demonstrating immense differences between what Rowan Williams actually said about Shari'a and the way in which it was represented by the press.

One of the most important strengths of the book is that it is a cohesive product of both theorists and practitioners of the media world. The editors of the book have very skillfully managed to make a whole range of voices from within and without of the mediascape to complement each other. In the last part of the volume these two perspectives are once again nicely merged to examine the institutions that produce newspaper articles, a key role of Muslim journalists in them and features of responsible journalism.

As for the weaknesses of the reviewed volume, it is a pity it only occasionally refers to non-British sources analysing the portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the media. One of the perspectives that could have particularly enriched the analysis in *Pointing the Finger* is the one proposed by the French sociologist Vincent Geisser in his '*La nouvelle islamophobie*' (2003). *Pointing the Finger* comes very handy at a time when the deepening economic crisis in Europe produces new populist demand for easy scapegoats. The book is a must read not only for all students of Islam and Muslims in Europe but also for all individuals who want to understand how contemporary media constructs and deconstructs social world around us.

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