

INFLUENCES ON ISLAM-RELATED NEWS CONTENT: MEDIA EXPERTS PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Islam is often portrayed negatively through manipulation of news content. Thus, a growing number of scholars have expressed concern over how Islam-related news is constructed. Therefore, this study aims to address the question of what influences Islam-related news content from the media experts' perspectives. The study employed a qualitative approach in which interviews were used as a data-gathering instrument. The participants consist of experts in the field of media and communication. Altogether, six experts were selected based on their intellectual ability and willingness to respond to the interview questions. The interview data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that journalists' prejudices, inadequate training, as well as media ownership are critical in the process of Islam-related news formation. These influences represent a serious problem that constitutes an obstacle to a good reporting of religion. It was envisaged that this study would be useful to journalists, media owners, governments, media policymakers, and other responsible bodies particularly in the process of news gathering, production, and dissemination. This study could also advance our understanding of the complex factors shaping Islam-related news content.

Keywords: Bias, Islam-related news, Influence, media experts, news content

INTRODUCTION

The question of what influences news content has become a debatable topic over the past few years (Al-Hasani, 2003; Colistra, 2008; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016; Riffe, 2011; Rossman, 2003). Understanding the nature of media content is crucial as it provides valuable indicators of social phenomena and represents a "useful and descriptive term that describes media output" (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016, p. 5). News content is the primary component of the news media. Therefore, publishers, editors, and journalists must be well-informed of news content formation, since it is they who might eventually be accountable for it. Despite the requirement for a series of editing processes in newspapers, at times, copies pass through almost unchanged and finally published. The quality and credible news content is often compromised (Hrvatina & Petkovic, 2004; Pędziwiatr, 2010).

In the contemporary media environment, Islam is often presented as negative archetypes, generally through manipulation of the news content (Hassan & Azmi, 2018; Shadid & Van Koningsveld, 2002). As a result, a growing number of scholars have expressed concern over the role of the media in constructing narratives that accentuate the sinister image of Islam (Alatas,

2005; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Ameli, Marandi, Ahmed, Kara, & Merali, 2007; Ammar, 2009; Dahinden, Koch, Wyss, & Keel, 2011; Powell, 2018). The media often use sensational content, creating superfluous fears, perhaps through exaggeration or by highlighting the negative aspect of the story (Ransohoff & Ransohoff, 2001).

Previous studies established that news content is likely to be influenced by different factors within and outside the media outlets (Colistra, 2008; Riffe, 2011; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). None of the previous studies specifically focused on the influences on Islam-related news content. Therefore, this study aims to address the question of what influences Islam-related news content from the media experts' perspectives. Studying these influences could be useful in understanding the complex factors shaping the media content, particularly Islam-related news. The news content must be taken seriously in the systematic analysis of media characteristics as it signals a particular research tradition (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Media Depiction of Islam

Several studies have investigated how Islam is represented in the media (Sultan, 2016; Samaie & Malmir, 2017; Bleich & van der Veen, 2018; Bleich, Souffrant, Stabler, der Veen, & Maurits, 2018; Nickerson, 2019, Hassan & Azmi, 2021). These studies indicated that the media tend to report Islam-related news negatively. Particularly, newspapers tend to associate Islam with terrorism (Powell, 2018; Nickerson, 2019; Hassan & Azmi, 2021). The negative depiction of Islam, as indicated in the previous research, is severely reproduced in media discourse. For instance, Samaie and Malmir (2017) used corpus analysis and critical discourse analysis to investigate the persistent depiction of Islam and Muslims in the media. A corpus of 670,000 words was generated from US-based news media between 2001 and 2015. According to the findings, Islam and Muslims are associated with terrorism, extremism, violence, as well as militancy.

Similarly, Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery (2013) employed critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to study forms of depiction around the word "Muslim". A corpus of 143 million words was generated from selected British newspapers between 1998 and 2009. The study showed that conflict, ethnicity, differentiating attributes, religion, culture, groups, and organizations were referenced in the noun collocates. The category of conflict was lexically rich and contains expressions. Additionally, a study shows that the media tend to portray Muslims as conservative, economically backward, and sympathetic to terrorists (Ewart et al., 2017). Bleich and Van der Veen (2018) also used computer-assisted lexicon analysis to explore how the media portray Muslims. The study found that the average articles' tone toward Muslims is largely more negative compared to the other groups.

Moreover, Nurullah (2010) claimed that the US news media tend to depict Islam and Muslims negatively by associating them with militancy and terrorism for the actions of a few Muslims who commit violence in the name of religion. In this regard, Shadid and van Koningsveld (2002) argued that the western media tend to portray a negative image of Islam through the choice and construction of news content. Another study argues that how mass media interpret events and

construct reality can influence audience's attitudes (Ahlin & Carler (2011). According to Saeed (2007), British media portray Muslims as "Other" and enemy to the west. This kind of portrayal can fuel the phobia of Islam, which originated from cultural depictions of the "Other". Also, Allen (2012) noted that the media reinforce the belief that Islam is a threat to the western society.

Additionally, Sultan (2016) argued that the media tend to construct reality by offering a mass-mediated outlook through depiction. This media depiction is seemingly connected with negative signifiers in the media portrayal of Islam and Muslims. A study conducted by Hayat and Wahab (2016) content-analyzed 50 media programs to explore the portrayal of Islam and Muslims. The study showed that Muslims were constructed as politically fanatics. Besides, Sian, Law, and Sayyid (2012) argued that the negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims remains hegemonic. According to Powell (2018), how the media frame Islam tend to reproduce fear and tension. Another study indicated that the dominant news media tend to misrepresent Muslims (Jahedi, Abdullah, & Mukundan, 2014).

Furthermore, Nickerson (2019) revealed that the media use subjective, negative images in a way that highlights prejudices against Muslims, even when the victims are Muslims. The media use unfair depiction to attract an audience, whereas negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims continue to be produced through various discursive strategies. This negative representation can cause intolerance towards Muslims (Ameli et al., 2007; Hassan & Azmi, 2019; Sultan, 2016).

Precisely, previous studies reported consistent findings regarding the media depiction of Islam and Muslims, indicating that Islam is misrepresented. Very few studies have investigated how Muslims react to the negative depiction of Islam. For example, Ewart et al. (2017) used focus group discussion to determine Muslims' attitudes toward media reporting of Islam and Muslims in Australia. The findings showed that Australian Muslims extremely criticized media coverage of Islam and Muslims. They also express worries that negative depictions of Islam can cause acrimony in society. Similarly, very few studies showed that the media tend to portray a positive image of Islam (Bleich et al., 2018; Hassan & Sabli, 2018).

Influences on News Content

Several studies investigated the perceived influences on news content (e.g. Al-Hasani, 2003; Colistra, 2008; Pearson, Brand, Archbold, & Rane, 2001; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016; Riffe, 2011; Rossman, 2003). For example, media ownership was found to be influential in the formation of news content (Pearson et al., 2001; Rossman, 2003). The argument is that corporate ownership of the mass media tends to bias the news content to serve the corporation's interests in particular and capitalist hegemony in general (Rossman, 2003). Media ownership influence can be in different forms, depending on the type of ownership. On account of state funding in the case of public media, the ownership is less commercially based, but the state has an excessive influence on their content. In the case of private media outlets, it is obligatory upon journalists to reflect the commercial interests of entrepreneurs who own the media outlets (Hrvatín & Petkovic, 2004). Ownership intervention is at times obvious, but more often defined as a subconscious pressure that leads to self-censorship (Pearson et al., 2001). However, Wang (2003) found that public media are more objective than private media because the content of commercially owned media outlets reflects the interest of the owners.

Another potential influence on news content is the journalist's mindset (Colistra, 2008; Pearson et al., 2001; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016; Riffe, 2011). Pearson et al. (2001) found that personal views are one of the various factors that influence journalists in performing their duties. Pearson et al. warned that the "behind-the-scene" influence of news reporters appeared to be underestimated. Objectivity is the oldest and the main condition for contemporary liberal journalism, as well as a critical factor that can influence the process of news production (Eltantawy, 2007). To achieve objectivity in news reporting, journalists must separate fact from imaginary, report both sides of a story, and pursue credible sources to clarify and back news reports.

News content is also influenced by the so-called "news value" – the extent to which the information differs from what is prevalent in society. To render a higher "news value" to information, reporters are inclined to emphasize more on differences or conflict rather than unity or harmony (Shadid & Van Koningsveld, 2002). Eltantawy (2007) noted that news values and journalistic style could and, at times, lack of familiarity with the topic lead to bias. Therefore, journalists must select what makes news through professional training, peer pressure, and newsroom discipline. They have to apply a set of news values to enable them to make decisions on the newsworthiness of stories.

Various factors, both within and outside media organizations, have been recognized as influencing news contents. Internal influences include individual journalists' mindsets, news values they adhere to, as well as their demographic features (such as gender and race) while external influences include social ideology, audiences, powerful sources, government regulations, politics, interest groups, and technological forces (Colistra, 2008; Ibrahim, Mustafa, Kee, & Ahmad, 2011; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016; Riffe, 2011). Al-Hasani (2003) examined the internal and external influences on news content in Omani news organizations. According to the findings, newspapers in the study area, both private or public, operate under government control. Similarly, Colistra (2008) found that factors outside the media organizations have a direct influence on news content. Journalists face pressures from different sources including readers, advertisers, news organizations, and personal financial burdens (Al-Hasani, (2003). Despite the need for traditional "objectivity" in journalism, news content is often influenced by the above factors (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). These factors, in the case of Islam-related news, are likely to shape the type of language that forms the portrayal of Islam and Muslims (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005; Hassan & Latiff Azmi, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative approach in which interviews were used as a data-gathering instrument. The participants consist of experts in the field of media and communication. Altogether, six experts from Nigeria and Malaysia (three from each country) were purposively selected to respond to the interview questions. All the participants are educated professionals who served in the media industry and are currently holding academic positions in universities. This population is chosen because useful trends may emerge from interviews with experts. In Nigeria, three

participants were selected from Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Bayero University Kano (BUK), and University of Jos (UNI JOS) respectively. In Malaysia, three participants were selected from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), and International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) respectively. The selection of participants was based upon a variety of criteria which include specialist knowledge of the research issue, as well as capacity and willingness to participate in the research (Palys, 2008; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Since the number of the participants was limited to six persons, it was decided that semi-structured interviews could be used to collect the data. According to Creswell (2012), this approach facilitates faster interviews and generates more information from the participants which may not be anticipated by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews provide actual words of people, offer many different perspectives on the topic, and provide a complex picture of the situation (Sewell, 2008). The same questions were designed to be answered by all the interviewees. The flow of questions was based on the interview conduct, but the participants were allowed to expand their answers. Specific questions were also asked to clarify any interesting piece of information arising during the interviews. The data were collected face-to-face, and subsequently, transcribed for interpretation.

Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data since qualitative data analysis is almost inevitably interpretive (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The interviews were analyzed using generalized four stages of analysis proposed by Cohen et al. (2007): generating natural units of meaning, classifying, categorizing, and ordering these units, structuring narratives to describe the interview content, and interpreting the interview. The data were inductively coded by reading through the text, identifying, classifying, and interpreting the themes based on the information given by the participants. Only the relevant information provided was coded and analyzed in a way that does not compromise the original meaning expressed by the participants. For the coding purpose, the six experts were coded as E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, and E6 throughout the process.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Two of the participants were females while four of them were males. All except one of the participants are PhD holders, including two professors. Their ages range between 35 and 55 years. Data generated from the interview were analyzed based on emerging themes under the pre-determined interview questions. The participants were asked to provide their views on what they think could influence news reporting of Islam. Their responses indicated that the journalist's perception, corporate ownership of the media, editorial policies, government regulations, and lack of proper training could influence the content of Islam-related news. These views are represented in the following table.

Table 1: Influences on Islam-related News

Themes	Exemplary quotes	Sources
Bias due to journalists' prejudices and inadequate training	I think biased reports could create a difference in the people's perceptions of Islam.	E6
	...if journalists will tell the truth, they will confess that they do not report fairly when they report on religion.	E5
	...I believe if journalists keep to journalistic ethics, they can report fairly on religion.	E5
	I think the perception of the reporters...	E4
	...another one is the reporter's opinion...a reporter should be properly trained to avoid bias because, sometimes, bias occurs as a result of ignorance.	E3
Influence of media ownership	...media ownership influences how journalists cover news stories, private ownership has more tendency of holding such sentiment.	E3
	...the owners of the media are aware of the kind of content disseminated...either we consider them as the source or their silence as approval of the messages.	E6
	I think media ownership is influential...	E5
	I think the ownership of the media outlet can influence the way news is reported.....	E2
Lack of objectivity due to poor media policies	...better media policies are needed to strengthen the credibility and emphasize objectivity in reporting Islam worldwide.	E3
	...journalists gather and disseminated news based on the policies of their media outlets.	E2
	...subjective policies, especially if not strictly formulated against sensationalism.	E6
Editorial bias of the media	If the media are biased against Islam, many people will be misinformed about Islam...	E2
	... and the whole of editorial...	E4
	...the media in that country also give similar reports based on their perception.	E4
Journalists' religious background	The editor makes sure that the news doesn't go against the government, religion, or ethnic group.	E1
	... your religious background does play a role in influencing the way you write your report.	E2
	... as well as the country where they come from...	E4
Government's media regulations	...if you look at those in the US, for example, they have this perception every time, especially after the 9/11 attacks.	E4
	...government can strongly influence news reporting of Islam.	E1
	...government has very strong regulations and policies monitoring the media.	E1
Journalists' socio-cultural and political background	,, but I don't think the western countries adhere to such ethics.	E1

As shown in Table 1, journalists' prejudices, improper training, media ownership, poor media policies, editorial bias, journalists' religious background, government regulations, as well as journalists' socio-cultural and political background are the potential influences on Islam-related news. The participants' dominant view suggests that bias due to journalists' prejudices and

inadequate training influence the way Islam-related news is reported (E3, E4, E5, E6). The journalists are likely to be influenced by their own prejudices either positively or negatively. According to the themes, failure to provide fair coverage of Islam has more to do with prejudices and inadequate training of journalists than the other factors. The media personnel is often blamed for constructing narratives that accentuate an ominous image of religious groups (Dart & Allen, 2000; Hassan, Azmi, & Abdullahi, 2020; Wright, 1997).

Lack of proper training of journalists on journalism ethics and coverage of religion constitutes unethical reporting. This is an obstacle to good reporting because journalists might cover an event according to certain shared assumptions, resulting in an unconscious negative representation of Islam. Religious illiteracy among reporters is a serious problem recognized within the journalism profession (Wright, 1997). Reporters' errors in stories are more likely due to unfamiliarity with religion. Uninformed reporters are often intellectually lazy to obtain facts when assigned to cover religious stories. Besides, the responses indicate that media ownership is important in determining the extent, nature, and direction of Islam-related news content. Though the quality of news comes from well-qualified reporters, its content is not free from owners' influence (Hrvatina & Petkovic, 2004; Okwuchukwu, 2014). Journalists often reflect the commercial interests of their media owners which are very influential in the process of news gathering and dissemination. Though both public and government ownership influence how journalists report news stories, private ownership has more tendency of holding sentiment than public ownership (E3).

The interview responses also indicate that editorial policies of the media organizations are crucial in determining Islam-related news content (Hrvatina & Petkovic, 2004). **Editorial bias** refers to favoring one opinion or position over others (Kuypers, 2002), which could have a strong influence within the purview of news gathering and reporting. The editors' role is, at times, demeaning to journalism as such for the satisfaction of the private interests of owners. Policies are formulated to guide the process of information gathering and dissemination, but most of these policies are unscrupulous. Besides, the interview data suggest that governments' government's media regulations could influence Islam-related news content. At times, the degree of freedom offered for the media determines the level of objectivity in their reporting (Ibrahim et al., 2011). However, "subjective policies, especially if not strictly formulated, can affect the way news is reported" (E6).

DISCUSSION

The findings reported in this study demonstrated that journalists' prejudices, inadequate training, as well as media ownership are critical in the process of Islam-related news formation. These findings are consistent with most previous studies on influences on news content (Colistra, 2008; Dart & Allen, 2000; Ibrahim et al., 2011; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016; Riffe, 2011). The inherent bias in the media is likely to create a negative image of Islam (Ammar, 2009). Dart and Allen (2010) asserted that the personal prejudices of news reporters and their ignorance influence much coverage of religion because uninformed reporters are too often intellectually lazy to get their facts straight when assigned to cover religious stories. Mostly, reporters do not provide the background and context that are required to apprehend why a certain incident occurred. In essence, most

reporters report issues about which they themselves do not have an in-depth understanding (Ammar, 2009). This perversion occurs because, in many media outlets, there are too few full-time religion reporters to provide the kind of in-depth coverage that religion deserves, which must be taken seriously, as faith and facts are often the sources of conflict between journalists and religionists (Dart & Allen, 2000).

According to Rugar (2012), lack of knowledge and in-house training of journalists is one of the main obstacles to good reporting of religion. Most journalists are not trained in religion, and there is fear among reporters, publishers, and editors that religion is always going to be controversial (Hoover, 2012). Concerning the influence of media ownership, Ammar (2009) asserted that media ownership gives elite groups the power to tell the journalists and editors what to write about and disseminate because the owners' interest makes it difficult for journalists to maintain the ethics of their profession. This influence might depend upon the type of ownership (Hrvatín & Petkovic, 2004; Omu, 2000; Wang, 2003). In this regard, Okwuchukwu (2014) posited that private media might serve their readers better but they have to secure an operating license under the government in most, if not all countries. This condition allows the government to regulate the activities of private media organizations. Hence, even the private media operate under the government's control. Hrvatín and Petkovic (2004) also contended that media ownership – public or private – matters a lot, but public media ownership is less biased than private ownership.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the complex factors shaping Islam-related news content from the media experts' perspectives. According to the findings, journalists' prejudices, inadequate training, as well as media ownership represent the most critical influences on Islam-related news formation. These issues constitute an obstacle to good reporting of religion because journalists often cover Islam-related news according to certain shared assumptions, which is likely to result in either conscious or unconscious negative representation of Islam. Personal preconceptions, religious illiteracy, and lack of proper training on journalism ethics and coverage of religion represent a serious problem recognized within the journalism profession. Additionally, news content is not free from owners' influence because journalists reflect the commercial interests of their proprietor, which is very influential in the process of news formation and dissemination.

Unethical reporting results in the failure to provide fair and balanced coverage of religion, which could influence the public's opinion. Therefore, the findings of this study offer valuable insights for the journalists, media owners, governments, media policymakers, and other responsible bodies, which could be useful particularly in the process of news gathering, production, and dissemination. This study could also advance our understanding of the complex factors shaping Islam-related news content. If journalists are properly trained in matters concerning religious reporting, and if objective media policies are formulated, the media are likely to promote peace and harmony in society.

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