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Islamophonic: New Styles in Reporting

NANDAGOPAL R. MENON

How can reporting be improved? Do emulation-worthy examples exist? This article argues that in his 1997 book, *Covering Islam*, Edward Said provides valuable insights into Islam and Muslim life that could inform a meaningful reporting on the subject. It then points out one rare instance of reportage where those insights have been put to use—"Islamophonic," a weekly information podcast started this January by the London-based Guardian group of publications. By analyzing three reporting samples from the podcast, this paper illustrates how a sophisticated and responsible reporting about Islamic issues and Muslims is realized by "Islamophonic." I conclude by drawing attention to how such reportage could contribute to creating better inter-community relations in a multicultural and multiethnic society like the UK.

Understanding Islam

Edward Said suggests in *Covering Islam* that Islam ought to be viewed at least at three broadly different, yet inter-linked, levels. First comes the Quran itself, the central religious text of the faith. Second is the broad interpretive frameworks: the huge corpus of Quranic commentaries (*tafsir*), the various biographies of the Prophet (*sira*), the traditions of the Prophet (Hadith) and the various schools of Islamic law. Third, and the most crucial, is the level in "which the various ideologies have been lived, the practices to which they have been linked, practices which certainly influenced them if they did not inspire them."¹ That is, the realm of the faithful—Muslims. Here the faith exists in its most complex and diverse forms, making reductionist generalizations, based exclusively on the first two levels, meaningless. However, all the three levels constantly interact and cannot be mechanically separated from each other. Said also notes how Islam cannot be used as a catch-all term to explain everything that happens in the lives of Muslims.

Representing Islam: the Islamophonic example²

Islamophonic started podcasting on 24 January 2007. Anchored by a young Muslim woman reporter of the *Guardian*, Riazat Butt, it is probably the first and only one of its kind produced by a Western media outlet not owned by a cultural or religious minority. A *Guardian* report (22 January 2007) announcing the launch of Islamophonic quoted Riazat Butt as saying that the podcast would "go beyond typical current affairs coverage" and would deal

with "how Islam is lived and breathed in this country [Britain]." To date, in over 20 episodes (of an average 20 to 25 minutes duration), podcast once a week (on Wednesdays), Islamophonic has touched upon various issues related to Islam in Britain—extremism, alcohol use among Muslims, Islamic music, Islamic finance and banking, Muslim magazines, dating culture among British Muslims, etc. Initially, each episode was roughly divided into three parts: reporting and discussion of a core issue (e.g., extremism), a "fatwa focus" (fatwas are given against specific questions asked by listeners), and a brief telephonic interview on current affairs with

The role of the European media in reproducing and reinforcing stereotypes and negative images of religious and ethnic minorities, particularly Muslims, is well documented. Since the media are the main sources of information about minority communities for majority groups, negative coverage has a potentially huge impact on inter-community relations in a multicultural and multiethnic Europe. While it remains important to challenge and falsify inaccurate and stereotypical media coverage, there is also a need for new forms of reporting that are sensitive to ambiguity and variation, and thereby promote intercultural understanding. The Islamophonic initiative offers an intriguing approach to such challenges.

a *Guardian* reporter based in a Muslim-dominated country or region. Of late, this structure has been dropped and the whole episode focuses on one topic. Let us begin with the episode of 7 February that focuses on alcohol and Islam. The reporter (Riazat Butt) goes to Manchester's Curry Mile to interview young Muslims who celebrate the Islamic festival of Eid by getting drunk. The first two to five minutes of the podcast are particularly striking. People shouting, horns blaring, and ear-breaking music played on car stereos from a heavily crowded street ("thousands of young Muslims," according to the reporter) and interviews with young Muslim revelers alternate with recitations from the

Quran by an imam of the local mosque and a local restaurant owner's complaints about how business is affected by the revelry. The imam recites a verse from the Quran and explains: "Islam is completely and totally against involvement in any form or any shape with the business of alcohol. Islam outrightly [sic] and completely forbids alcohol usage." The narrative cuts to the reporter asking the young Muslims on the street why and whom they drink with. One of them says: "We are away from home and we are just enjoying ourselves ... See, all these lads, all are Muslims; they are good lads as well." This is juxtaposed with a local restaurant owner's angry remarks: "The way they [the youngsters] celebrate is just drive up and down the road flashing off their dads' flashy cars ... They block the traffic and our English clientele can't come through ..." But he, being a Muslim, has his own dilemmas. He said he sold alcohol in his restaurant, as did the majority of other Muslim-owned restaurants, and added that there was tension between restaurant-owners and their families, some of who refused to eat there. When the reporter asks if he serves alcohol to his Muslim customers, he replies: "The first thing they come in and ask you is 'Is the food halal?' and we say 'yes'. After that they ask for a couple of pints of lager. And we don't understand that logic ..." Be it celebrating Eid or the demands of business, both provide contexts to flout clerical and textual directives outlawing alcohol as haram. Is alcohol an exception? What about other things traditionally considered to be haram?

The episode of 28 February deals with Islamic music. It begins by playing samples of Islamic music from across the world and the reporter asks an imam for expert opinion on what the religion says about music. The imam explains:

Muslim scholarship has been divided about the rulings relating to music ... The basis for those who feel or believe that music is forbidden in Islam is [a] number of sayings from the Messenger Muhammed (peace be upon Him) in which musical instruments are likened to the tools of Satan ... There is a group that says that string and wind instruments are forbidden; however, the drum is allowed. There is another school of thought that says that ... contemporary music is forbidden; however, music which enhances one's spiritual well-being is allowed ...

This is followed by an interview with a member of the British Nasheed group Shaam. He speaks about how his group is adapting Nasheed to British conditions:

Lot of the traditional material is from many hundreds of years ago. What we try to do is to introduce that to a Western, younger listening audience. Because we were born and raised in the West we add a contemporary touch to our music ... We are trying to have a East meets West kind of thing.

Above all, the reporting proves the impossibility of explaining all these diverse experiences using the term "Islam."

Image not available online

PHOTO BY DARREN STAPLES / © REUTERS, 2007

From the spirituality of the Nasheeds and Qawwalis the focus switches to heavily politicized Islamic hip-hop and rap. Aki Nawaz, mainstay of the band Fun-da-Mental, speaks about his politics, religion, and music:

If you talk about politics in my work, politics comes before the music and it has always done. You find that politics, religion, culture, racism, identity, and sexism has [sic] always been a part of our vision ... My work is a soundtrack to the reality that is going on around us ... In terms of zikr, Allah and all that stuff, I think our work is based on love anyway, but we will go to war for love. That is the difference. We are not passive people.

The problems inherent in jumping to conclusions about day-to-day Muslim life by relying solely on what the Quran or religious scholars say are clearly illustrated by the last two reports on alcohol and music. Now, let us look at another newsworthy aspect of Islam, especially so given the strife in occupied Iraq—sectarian differences. The podcast of 21 March gave an overview of the historical and theological evolution of the Shias and delved into the lives of the Shia Muslims in Britain. Constituting a minority within a minority (Muslims in Britain), the Shiite presence in Britain dates back to only the early 1970s. After a detailed description of an Ashura ceremony among Birmingham-based Shias originally hailing from Afghanistan, a relatively underprivileged group within the community when compared to those who have an Arab and Persian background, the reporter speaks to an Afghani Shia community leader. He explains their situation:

Community Leader: We don't have any place [of worship] ... We don't have anybody to go to ... and to ask ... to help us to settle ourselves here. It is very hard.

Reporter: What kind of help do you get from other Shia communities?

CL: The problem is the language. We cannot communicate very easily with them. They have their own culture, their own agenda ...

R: Is there a class difference as well?

CL: They [the non-Afghani Shias] are a settled community ... Most of us are workers, not professionals ... Working in factories, as security officers ...

Accepting that the larger Shia community has to help the Afghans, a Shia Islamic scholar interviewed for the podcast points to an important emerging trend in his community in Britain:

[New] communities [are coming up] which are multiethnic, which focus their rituals and practices around the use of English ... And there are particular centres, groups which are pretty much focused on the use of English to spread understanding of the faith. [This] includes the [celebration of] Muharram rituals and the Ashura in English [with] the chanting of English verse along with flagellation.

The British Islam that emerges from Islamophonic's representation is quite complex. There is no overarching, one-size-fits-all definition to explain every aspect of British Muslim life; communities are divided and subdivided along class, ethnic and linguistic lines, making the talk of a monolithic "British Muslim community" impossible. At least some of the teachings of the faith are observed more in breach than in practice and, moreover, they have been adapted to meet the requirements of British

conditions. In short, Islamophonic brings to light the rich tapestry of and the many shades of green in British Islam. The episodes on music and alcohol almost exactly follow Said's model: What the Quran says and its interpretations (the imams' interviews), and how the beliefs are lived and practised (the youngsters on the street of Manchester, the Nasheed group singer and the hip-hop artist). Islamophonic's style of presentation—for instance, in the episode on alcohol, continuously alternating among the comments of the imam, the revelry on the street and the complaints of the restaurant owner—is equally important. Fürsich writes: "Juxtaposing the traditional dichotomized images with fluid hybrid images smashes the monolithic totality of those images."³ Especially noteworthy is the quotidian life of Muslims revealed in the reporting examples. The revellers in Manchester who have no qualms in identifying themselves as Muslims, but also get drunk; the customers who ask for "halal food," but also demand a "few pints of lager"; and the restaurant owner's dilemma in reconciling his Islam with selling alcohol—all this points to a very personal negotiation and redefinition of the faith, relatively free from any overall control of clerical or textual authority, that exists in British Islam. Much of this happens also because of the changed

circumstances (Western/English) that Muslims find themselves in. The Nasheed group singer and the Shia Islamic scholar speak about how English is being increasingly used to win new listeners and to bridge the divide among linguistically different Shia communities respectively. To make sense of their religion in a Western context, they have to interpret their traditions and adapt them to the new situation. Above all, the reporting proves the impossibility of explaining all these diverse experiences using the term "Islam." For instance, to understand the relative marginalization of the Afghani Shias within their own religious community, we have to understand their class status and linguistic differences. No amount of theology or religious history alone can help us to get a full grip on it. Similarly, the music of Aki Nawaz has more to do with a very Leftist brand of angry, anti-establishment politics than Islam. And even if the imams, the revellers, the Nasheed group singer, and the Shia scholar, all lay claim to represent Islam, we will have to look elsewhere, to social and historical factors, to make full sense of the diverse behaviours and views.

Conclusion

The power of negative media coverage is such that even when proximity with the "Others" (in our case, Muslims) is a reality—for example, in a very multicultural and multiethnic society like Britain, where at least some sort of familiarity (e.g., at work places) with Muslims exist—it is insufficient to challenge that coverage. Poole writes: "To override dominant media representations, the contact must include dialogue that encourages an understanding of Islamic beliefs and practices, and a sense of how these are interpreted through one's own cultural frameworks."⁴ By focusing on aspects of Islamic life mostly ignored by the media, representing them in all their complexity and shunning the obsession with "problem-news" when it comes to Muslims, Islamophonic might be doing what Poole is recommending. Islamophonic's reporting also raises some other important questions—Is there a British/European Islam, distinct from its counterparts in other parts of the world? What does it mean to be a Muslim in the UK/Europe? Moreover, significant is the fact that such an initiative has been taken by a mainstream media group which owns one of the world's most accessed and trusted newspaper websites. The result could be that the message would reach more people and have more impact.

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**Central Mosque,
Birmingham,
2007**

Notes

1. Rodinson, 1979, cited in Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world* (London: Vintage, 1997), 58.
2. The episodes of Islamophonic were accessed at <http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/podcasts/cat-766/>. No transcripts are available and the portions of the programme reproduced in this paper were transcribed by the author.
3. E. Fürsich, "How can global journalists represent the 'Other'? A critical assessment of the cultural studies concept for media practice," *Journalism* 3, no. 1 (2002): 57–84, p. 76.
4. E. Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 241.