Young Muslims and Muslim Media in Britain[1]

Abstract

Many young Muslims in Britain are becoming more confident about asserting a specifically religious identity. This desire to be 'Muslim' is reflected in the social, cultural and educational activities they participate in and other aspects of their behaviour are strongly influenced by the increasing importance of Islam in their lives, including their consumption of media. The role of the media, especially Muslim media, in the development of Muslim identities and communities is increasingly evident. As this media form develops it provides a rich resource for the construction of British Muslim identities and presents Muslim communities with a platform from which to communicate amongst themselves and evolve as a minority population within Europe. For young, second and third generation Muslims, these media forms can offer new ways of thinking about what it means to be Muslim and can help develop new cultures which combine parental traditions with norms from the host society. Muslim media also provides opportunities for dialogue with wider society, thus being one of the most potentially useful ways of building relations with other groups in society. The processes of globalisation have impacted on the development of media and the information available to young Muslims has become more varied in content, which influences how they see themselves not only as British Muslims but as part of a wider European and global umma[2].

In order to investigate the relationship between media culture, the social landscapes and changing concepts of 'community' in which Muslims find themselves, and articulations of their identity, this paper examines the lives of young Muslims in relation to their consumption of Muslim media, both traditional and those using new information technologies. To contextualise their media consumption and present real examples of Muslim media, an overview of Muslim publications (press and internet) will be given, offering a political economy of Muslim media in Britain. The aims and objectives of media editors are also presented giving an insight into how they see themselves as contributing to a knowledgeable society.

Introduction

The role of media in contemporary society is increasingly evident. With advances in information and communication technologies, traditional sectors of media are being supplemented with new means of information production and dissemination. One of the most apparent developments in recent times has been the greater availability of alternative, community media sources. In addition, the development of media in a globalising world is presenting us with new ideas about community and identity, enabling diverse and dispersed people to build new contacts and redefine what it means to belong. These processes are undoubtedly affecting all populations around the world, however, studying their particular impact on Muslim communities is of importance in the current geopolitical climate.

By examining how a selected group of young Muslims in Britain are using and thinking about media, this paper examines the role of community media as a vehicle for change and development amongst a religious and ethnic minority in European society. It will be suggested that expanding the definition of media to include more than just press and electronic communication enables us to gain a better understanding of how young Muslims are expressing themselves, creating new cultural spaces and developing collective identities.

This paper consists of three sections; the first presents a brief history and current overview of Muslim publications in Britain (selected newspapers and magazines); the second focuses on the presence of Muslims in cyberspace and the third examines how various forms of expression are influencing what it means to be a young Muslim in Britain through social, cultural and educational practices (using two examples of new Muslim organisations).

Muslim Publications in Britain – An Overview

The existence of Muslim press in Britain is a relatively recent phenomenon. Though a small number of publications have been in circulation for many years[3], the majority of publications have a shorter history. The events of late 1989 onwards with respect to the Muslim community, specifically the reaction to Salman Rushdie's book, *The Satanic Verses*, and the first military action in the Gulf, were the background events in which the beginnings of much of the Muslim press can be framed. The demand for media in English grew as this became the preferred language for a growing number of Muslims. Newspapers had often previously been in the mother tongue (e.g. *The Jang* and *Awaz*), effectively cutting out many second generation Muslims[4] who although had a basic command of spoken Urdu, Punjabi or Bengali, for example, were often not fluent in reading or writing it. As the Muslim communities developed a more distinctly *religious* identity, alternatives to mainstream media were sought through which to express this identity and Muslim media become an important means by which information was obtained and ideas developed. Those with a desire to maintain (and even strengthen) cultural and religious identities saw a strong and vibrant media as was one way to help achieve this. There was much encouragement from the community in the development of Muslim media at this early stage.

In expressing their aims and objectives for setting up publications, editors noted that the intention was to produce a publication - title, content, outlook - that reflected strongly a Muslim or Islamic identity of both its producers and its readers. This took place in an environment that was also keen to promote a Muslim identity and editors were conscious about distinguishing themselves from the British Asian media. The nature of the British Muslim population meant that a large proportion of Muslims were South Asian but despite this fact the publications wanted a strictly *Muslim* identity. This was encouraged both from the readers and writers themselves. Certain aims and objectives for setting up their respective publications were shared by all editors, for example, the gap seen in mainstream media in reporting on Muslim issues and the need for a perspective more aware and sympathetic to Muslims. A combination of both the demand from within the Muslim community as well as editors' own conviction brought about the realisation of Muslim media.

Clearly the contents and outlook of each publication are determined by the background of the publications itself, the ideological or political stance it takes, its editor/writers and its expected readership. It is also determined by whether the producers' aim is to provide a current affairs (political) source of information or is more concerned with addressing social and cultural issues. All publications advertise events taking place around the country aimed at young Muslims, have book reviews and also publicise charity appeals (mainly Muslim charity/relief organisations). As certain publications have arisen out of already established groups or movements, for example, *Crescent International* closely follows trends stimulated by the Iranian revolution, the ethos of the publication reflects this. Whereas *The Invitation* (The Family Magazine), as its subtitle indicates, is aimed at young families and the simpler writing style reflects this. For *Q-News* their niche market appears to be young, professional Muslims for whom they are providing a publication relating relevant social and cultural issues. The recent[5] expansion of *Q-News* into the North American market also indicates they are targeting young diaspora Muslims in the West, presumably having identified the commonality between the European and North American markets.

The variety of issues covered by the publications varies and like mainstream media they have regular features. Editorials, news, book and conference reviews, profiles, regular contributors, spiritual sections, question and answer, matrimonial, jobs and other advertising are amongst these. At this fairly early stage of development of Muslim media - not even 15 years for some publications - much of the focus is solely on Muslim issues. The editors themselves want to expand the topics they cover and almost be an Islamic version of a broadsheet so that they are not always tackling negative issues or issues of concern to the Muslim communities alone; to this extent the editors are conscious of their

niche within the media environment. They are providing news from different sources and also topics which mainstream media would not cover or would do so in ways perceived to be inaccurate.

The diversity of Muslim media is illustrated by the different kinds of publications available (see Appendix A for a selection of publications with some basic information about each). Most publications (excluding specialist ones) tend to have a combination of current affairs, social and 'religious' issues. The latter category comprised of faith or belief issues, explanations on the *Qur'an*[6] and *hadith*[7], 'how to' guides on certain practices in Islam and reminders of special dates in the Islamic calendar. Social and cultural matters relating to Muslims in Britain and dealing with problems in the community were also a focus. The target audience of many of the publications tends to be young Muslims, therefore it is common to find the types of issues affecting this age group in the pages of magazines. Frequency of publication (weekly, monthly, bi-monthly etc) automatically influenced the currency of topics.

Muslim media is certainly playing a key role in developing and disseminating Islamic knowledge to Muslims, particularly in diaspora communities. Not only have young Muslims utilised Muslim media as an alternative to mainstream media but they are actively seeking out Muslim 'media' (used in the broadest sense to include audio-visual, electronic, print and social and cultural activities) to fulfil the requirement of obtaining religious knowledge. Disillusionment with reporting on Islam and Muslims in British mainstream media (and Western media in general) has been a specific reason for opting for Muslim media (see Table 1 for reasons cited for reading Muslim publications). For those particularly conscious of their religious obligation to seek useful Islamic knowledge, mainstream media has been of less significance, in fact to be avoided wherever possible. This focus on Islamic learning is also visible in academia, with organisations emerging to deal with the roles and responsibilities of Muslim academics, researchers and students.

Table 1. Reasons for Reading Publications

Reason	Frequency
Muslim current affairs (national and international)	47
Religious knowledge	21
Interesting news/articles	9
Supporting Muslim media	7
News from alternative perspective	5
Sense of community/unity	4
Disillusionment with mainstream media	3
Reviews	2
Academic study	2

Respondents often gave more than one reason.

In a way the diversity within Muslim media represents the variety of opinions, organisations and perspectives within the British Muslim population. Identifications with various ways of thinking and approaches to Islam such as different political inclinations, *dawah*[8] oriented outlooks, academic or spiritual Islam, are facilitated and reinforced by different publications. Certain fundamental aspects of identifying oneself with Islam are shared by almost all groups of Muslims, but there is also diversity amongst them like in any other community.

The Muslim Presence in Cyberspace

Whilst the older, more traditional sectors of the media such as the press are developing, Muslims are also familiarising themselves with new technologies and means of disseminating information. One of the most significant of these is the Internet. The number and variety of internet pages relating to issues about Islam and Muslims is great. It would be difficult to mention all of these in any comprehensive

way but the following can be noted from even a brief search of internet websites on Islam and Muslims:

- Due to the structure and distribution of the internet and its users, many websites are based in Western countries and are in English;
- There is diversity in the ideological or sectarian outlook of websites;
- Various categories of website exist, for example, organisations' homepages, individual homepages, academic and research forums;
- The contents range from *dawah* material, informative/educational, political, current affairs, inter-faith dialogue and indices of articles, as well as discussion lists.

In addition it is interesting to highlight some of the most common themes found on websites. These are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Internet WebPages Relating to Islam and/or Muslims

Fundamentals of Islam	The Holy Prophet (pbuh)[9]
The *Qur'an*	Muslims in the West
How to pray	Events listings
Islamic articles	Women in Islam
Mosques listings	Pray times
Question and Answer	*Qur'an* and *hadith* browsers
News from the Muslim world	Political Islam
Dawah (invitation to Islam)	Rulings on various legal issues
Common misconceptions	Matrimonials
Charity appeals	Interfaith

Bunt (2000) explores the internet presence of Islam and Muslims using specific categories. He surveys the diversity of material available, for example, *Qur'an* and *hadith* literature (including various translations of the *Qur'an* available to search, download and listen to using audio technology), jurisprudence according to the four schools of thought, ideas of Muslim philosophers, Shi'a literature and 'converts' related literature. The diversity he finds is also along ideological lines with Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi and unorthodox groups all expressing themselves on-line. Political dimensions are explored by using the examples of several countries around the world were the internet is playing a part in articulating Islamic and Muslim discourses (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, Malaysia, Singapore, Sudan and Saudi Arabia). He also demonstrates how 'political Islam' is manifesting itself with groups such as HAMAS and Hezbollah and what he classifies as dissident groups such as the Campaign for Democracy and Legal Rights (CDLR) also having a presence on the internet[10].

This diversity does not mean however that there are no common grounds between different websites. There is 'connectiveness' on certain issues such as the five pillars of Islam. Similar to Mandaville's (2001) analysis of how the internet and global technologies are affecting Muslims, Bunt (2000) sees the role of the internet as one of an authority dealing with people's questions and concerns about being a Muslim. The servicing of Muslim websites has also developed with web designers, maintainers and navigators in place to help existing websites and create new ones. Some of these bigger 'gateway' sites provide links to further sites making navigation of the internet easier for users.

Baktiari's (2000) study of the 'Cybermuslim and the Internet' also lists various websites relating to Islam and/or Muslims. He sees the net as having three consequences for Muslims; reducing geographical limitations, challenging traditional methods of learning and accelerating pluralism in Islamic political activity. Websites have also been useful channels for conversion to Islam, where ironically people who have been curious about negative media portrayal of Islam or have tried to

convert Muslims, have themselves become Muslims (Winter, 1999). By presenting details about 100 converts to Islam, Winter notes that the internet plays a significant role in missionary activities.

The internet is certainly a medium of great importance to young Muslims in Britain. Whilst there have been positive aspects of coming on-line, there have also been conflicts between different Muslim website regulators, a proliferation of deviant sects, blatantly false information about Islam, unregulated chat rooms enabling un-Islamic behaviour and a very limited (if any) presence of scholars and *shaykhs*[11] to act as proper authorities. So although these are issues which Muslims have to consider, the relatively cheap and easy access to the internet and the wide range of information available on millions of WebPages means that the Muslim presence in cyberspace is of increasing significance.

Community 'Media' - Active Identity, Self-Expressions and New Cultures

The notion of community has gained much significance in recent years. Whilst on the one hand globalising forces appear to be fragmenting traditional community structures, on the other, revived and new ideas of community and identity are being formulated. For young Muslims in Britain their concerns about members of the Muslim *umma* in different parts of the world have enabled them to define and redefine the communities in which they live - be these real or virtual. Extensive reporting in the Muslim media of international conflicts, natural disasters, political, economic and socio-cultural issues covering the Muslim population from China to Alaska, has increased awareness of a *global* Muslim community. At the same time, local structures and activities have realigned the associations and identifications of young Muslims. In avoiding mainstream social and cultural activities, including media, they are establishing new social spaces for themselves. Whilst not totally rejecting their parental and traditional community structures and customs, they are increasingly taking into consideration the British aspect of their lives and outlook. By breaking down and questioning some of the boundaries that exist within their own ethnic, class and gender groupings, they have used the idea of 'Muslim-ness' to redraw their own small communities. These smaller, localised associations often have links with movements or ideologies operating on a global scale.

Closely tied to the development of different ideas of community and these new social spaces is the role of Muslim media. The Muslim media have promoted the concept of a Muslim identity to a considerable degree and many pages are devoted to discussing this concept as well as advertising events which are related to it. One of the ways in which new concepts of community can be detected amongst young British Muslims is through their social, cultural and educational activities. Additionally, the structures and organisations which they are establishing give an indication of the focus of their social lives. Some of the activities are shown in Table 3 (page 6).

Examining the wide range of activities that young Muslims are participating in demonstrates that the idea of 'media' consumption can be expanded to include less conventionally recognised media. Indeed the significance of these types of activities may surpass the importance of traditional print or electronic media. This may be especially the case if young Muslims are deliberately excluding or limiting their intake of mainstream media, though their attention may turn to Muslim media, which includes audio and video cassettes, websites and electronic mailing and discussion lists as well as publications.

Table 3. Activities Mentioned by Respondents

Activity	Females (12)	Males (6)
Study Circles	10	4
Lectures	3	4
Other Learning*	8	-
Family/Friends	10	4
Weddings, parties, events	3	1
Sport	-	4
Cinema	1	2
Camps	-	2
Non-Islamic learning	2	1
Conferences	1	-
Mosque	-	2
Dhikr[12]	1	1
Yoga/Meditation	1	-

* This includes Arabic and *tajweed*[13] classes.

Apart from reporting on events around the country and globally, Muslim media works to influence and shape the way Muslim communities themselves develop. For those readers who are actively looking to Muslim media as their main source of information and as a way through which to measure their own opinions, its presence is vital. Using the media as a stimulus for discussions with other Muslims is one way of developing concepts and issues in the community. As the concept of British Muslim identity is often discussed within the pages of Muslim media, readers are automatically focused on this issue. By writing about experiences and possibilities of being a British Muslim, readers can relate to others in their community. Cases of discrimination, issues of education, employment and similar concerns are shared and the media highlights these experiences to reflect the reality of living in Britain as Muslims. The shared experiences portrayed in the media then lead to a perception of shared identity because Muslims in various parts of Britain are tackling similar issues and facing the same challenges. So whilst raising awareness amongst its readers, the Muslim media is also contributing to a sense of belonging to a particular community and therefore it has helped enhance a British Muslim identity[14], as illustrated by the following quotes[15]:

> "I get a feeling of belonging to the Muslim *umma* as I go through Muslim media - something that was not there before I started reading Muslim publications".

> "The Muslim media has contributed greatly to my sense of belonging to a British Muslim community because it has made me aware of worldly issues that concern me as a Muslim. The Muslim media has greatly contributed with equipping me with the necessary knowledge of Islam to inform my non-Muslim friends what Islam is really all about and I can now also answer their questions about Islamic issues which I would otherwise have difficulty with".

British Muslims have recognised the importance of mediated communities in today's global setting. Media and technology have brought together seemingly dispersed communities (Mandaville, 2000) and this unification has found expression in local media. Not only has access to information increased the opportunities for learning about Islam but it has also developed a sense of belonging and identification with a local, national and global *umma*. The concept of identity links very strongly to knowing about other Muslims and their condition and being informed about Muslims around the world seems to have a direct link to how people identified themselves as Muslims. For many then identity has been influenced directly by the existence of Muslim media. This seems to have been done mainly through providing knowledge and information about Muslims and obtaining religious advice and instructions.

Establishing an infrastructure of Muslim institutions such as the media and social and cultural activities is helping to create an alternative social life for Muslims. At the same time there is an appreciation of these organisations and structures retaining an element of British-ness. Art and film exhibitions, promotion of Islamic calligraphy and music are all evidence of the development of a *halal*[16] alternative to mainstream cultural activities. For second and subsequent generations of Muslims in Britain, the need to create these new social spaces is evident through the establishment of new organisations which reflect the idea of a *British Muslim* identity. Two such organisations are City Circle and ArRum. Both organisations point towards new ways in which Muslims are expressing aims and aspirations for themselves as citizens of Britain, playing a confident and fully inclusive role in society. These aims are expressed for those involved in the City Circle:

> "For the organisers, the City Circle presents a pioneering opportunity to channel the dynamic talents and unique energies of young Muslim professionals into grassroots community activity. (e.g. education projects with youngsters in the inner city). By fulfilling their social and community responsibilities, these young men and women are applying the learning they take on board from the study circles and social forums. In this way the City Circle hopes that it can make a contribution to the betterment of civil society in the UK in the 21st century".[17]

The second of the two organisations, ArRum, based in London, is a social club which opened in October 2001. Incorporating beautiful Islamic art and design into its surrounding, it is a space within which Muslims can interact with each other and develop their own social life. "Celebrating our cultural heritage, promoting a God-centred approach to life, asserting our British-ness and associating Islam with beauty" are amongst the aims of the founder for her club (Yaqub, 2001). Within the Club there are 'circles' for art, cultural knowledge, business and careers. Some of ArRum's activities include involvement in an anti-war movement through fundraising, organising an awareness campaign and housing a photographic exhibition of Afghanistan. ArRum's webpage carries comments from various members of the Muslim community expressing their aspirations for the Club, for example;

> "The establishment of ArRum can be taken as a sign of the coming of age of the Muslim community …. Islam does not isolate different aspects of life but tries to bring them together, so the Club will emphasise the splendour of Islamic art and culture while proving a venue for productive networking between Muslims who are active in public life, in industry or business".[18]

Between March and August 2002 ArRum (in conjunction with IMAN, FAIR and Khayaal Theatre) hosted a Festival entitled 'Best of British Islam'. The festival, held at the ArRum premises, consisted of over 100 events (lectures, workshops, films, theatre and musical performances) in visual, creative, performing and literary arts, faith and spirituality, Islamic thought, community affairs, business, gender dynamics, Islam and science, current affairs and Islam - past and future. The festival aimed to "reach out, inform, provoke, entertain but above all celebrate the depth and diversity of Islam in Britain"[19]. What does this type of activity demonstrate about the outlook of Muslims in Britain? ArRum itself is an example of a new social, cultural and educational space for British Muslims and this Festival shares similar elements to some of the activities cited above, though its audience is perhaps more diverse than just university students or young Muslims. The title and presentation of the Festival can be seen as a positive and assertive manifestation of how Muslims see themselves in society[20]. Rather than represent Islam as detached from British society, something sitting uncomfortably on the surface, they have presented it as in the grain of British-ness. 'Best of British Islam' gives a sense of permanency, like that of any British heritage, creating an alternative discourse to Islam being a foreign entity in Britain. As well as appealing to non-Muslims (whom probably form the minority of attendees) the Festival was a way of rescuing the image of Islam amongst Muslims. Where young Muslims may be presented with a contradiction between being Muslim and being British, the Festival steers away from this dichotomy by showing that it is possible to be Muslim *and* British. It dispels fears that being Muslim means having no social life, no contact with arts or 'culture'

and no capacity to develop intellectually, by offering entertainment and debate with an Islamic ethos. Perhaps the people involved in the Festival, both organisers and visitors, are saying we want to be recognised as British Muslims, without compromising either our Islamic values or our affiliation to Britain. In addition the message that it appears to be presenting is that Islam can exist in Britain without posing a threat or being a danger, either to itself or to Britain. This is a prime example of how broader 'media' forms are being used to communicate with the host society in which British Muslims are now firmly established. It also paves the way for the development of new cultures that are absorbing elements of all the other cultures and discourses to which young Muslims are exposed.

An entire social, cultural and educational infrastructure appears to be developing amongst young Muslims which provides 'Islamic' alternatives in areas of entertainment and social life but more importantly in knowledge acquisition. By furnishing themselves with information about fellow Muslims, readers of Muslim media perceive a feeling of community or belonging created by this media (both through its production and consumption). This belonging includes local and national Muslim groups but also extends to the global Muslim *umma*, going beyond simple diaspora connections (mainly to South Asia and other South Asian Muslims around the world for those in my research). For Muslims in Britain it also takes into consideration their position as European Muslims. Asserting a more confident British-ness will no doubt extend to impact on the wider European identity of young Muslims. Ramadan (1999) sees media and social structures as being one of the most important elements through which Muslims will become inclusive European citizens. Developing Islamic entertainment and new European-Muslim cultures through their intellectual growth and activities is paramount for young Muslims. This will enable them to exist as a minority religious and ethnic group which is neither isolationist nor assimilationist but one which merges surrounding cultures and values whilst retaining its own cultural and religious principles.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine the lives of young British Muslims in relation to their media consumption and identify the role this media is playing in developing their ideas of self and community. Community media has grown out of a set of circumstances that have determined its progression and its overall focus has been on concerns and issues affecting British Muslims. The Muslim media serves a number of functions. It acts as a source of information on issues of relevance to British Muslim communities and from this British Muslims acquire knowledge which helps them to understand the situations affecting them and how to make informed decisions on relevant issues, such as, political representation, religious discrimination and education. Within the Muslim communities the Muslim media's functions include the creation and development of a knowledgeable society. As one editor commented Muslim media should be working towards creating "a better informed society, better informed Muslims" (*Impact*). Investing in Muslim media as well as keeping involved with mainstream media is important if Muslims are to develop and contribute in society.

The need for Muslims to express themselves and be represented has been partly fulfilled by the Muslim media and in this way media needs to be included in the broad socio-cultural and political infrastructure of representation. Having a platform on which to voice their opinions within the Muslim community is a positive step towards having greater representation in wider society. Muslim 'media' is also being used to reach out to host communities and develop positive relationships between different sections of society, particularly important in today's socio-political climate.

The numerous forms of community media, both new and old, are not only enabling Muslims to explore new ways of expressing their conviction to Islam and what it means to be Muslim, but they are creating new hybrid cultures which merge together aspects of South Asian culture, Islam and British cultural norms. These in turn are being complemented by increasing information about Islam at a global level and giving rise to new relationships between young British Muslims and their

environment. The emergence of a distinct Muslim media has provided a focal point through which Muslims, and particularly young Muslims, can find expression of their concerns and aspirations. Enthusiasm for Muslim media demonstrates the need for a public discourse on Islam and Muslims and Muslim media have articulated a British Muslim-ness which their readers find increasingly relevant to their lives.

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Notes

[1] The empirical data presented in this paper was collected for my PhD thesis, *Young British Muslims: Social Space and Active Identity* (Leicester University, 2002).

[2] *Umma* refers to the Muslim community.

[3] For example, *Impact International* began in the early 1970s.

[4] The majority of my respondents were South Asian Muslims, therefore I concentrate on this section of the Muslim population whilst acknowledging the great ethnic diversity of British Muslims.

[5] First editions were launched at the beginning of 2002.

[6] The *Qur'an* is the Holy Book of Islam.

[7] *Hadith* literature relates to the sayings and practices of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

[8] *Dawah* is the Arabic word for invitation to or propagation of Islam.

[9] pbuh – an abbreviation used after the Prophet's name which denotes 'peace be upon him'.

[10] For continuously updated information on these websites see Bunt's webpage at www.virtuallyislamic.com

[11] A *shaykh* is someone trained in the religious sciences.

[12] *Dhikr* is remembrance (of God)

[13] The science of reciting the *Qur'an*.

[14] This can be compared to Anderson's (1983) concept of an 'imagined community'.

[15] Taken from results of survey distributed using Muslim publications (doctoral research).

[16] Permissible.

[17] Supplied by an organiser of the City Circle (February 2002).

[18] Hasan Gai Eaton, http://www.arrum.co.uk/about.htm

[19] See www.fairuk.org

[20] One method of publicity has been mail-shot flyers with a postcard format carrying a Union Jack on the front. The Union Jack is illustrated with Islamic geometric and artistic patterns and quite deliberately superimposes a very obvious icon of British-ness (the flag) with Islamic symbolism.