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ISLAMOPHOBIA AND BRITISH TERRESTRIAL BROADCASTING: THE CASE OF DOCUMENTARIES ON ISLAM

Abstract

Recent discussions on Muslims and their relations with non-Muslims have tended to ‘alarmism’ and suggestions of promoting Islamophobia. Simplified views of Muslims and non-Muslims have led to stereotypes of each other. In order to avoid stereotyping, at least in Western societies, Halliday has proposed a ‘modernist’ model, which reduces ‘simplification’, ‘generalization’ and ‘historicization’ and places emphasis on ‘diversity’. A sample of ten documentaries, in the form of fourteen programmes, was subjected to qualitative documentary analysis. This revealed that these programmes indicate a situation that is associated with the ‘modernist’ model in general, rather than a ‘stereotypical’ or simplified approach that can promote Islamophobia.

Key words: Islamophobia, identities, diversity, media, documentary, Britain

Introduction

The relationship between Islam and the West has been at the centre of public discussions in the post-Cold War era, particularly after the catastrophe of 9/11. Whether describing the relations between Muslim states and non-Muslim societies or that of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims within Western countries, discussions, both academic and media reports, have tended to ‘alarmism’ and uninformed views of Muslims (Halliday 1999, 2002). Alarmism can be two directional: it is defined as the threat that Islam poses to non-Muslims and the threat of the West to Muslims (Halliday 1999:892). However, the focus of this article is the former.

Considering the pervasiveness of the media and its breadth of spread in this global village, which goes beyond the face-to-face world of daily interaction, the cultivation and transmission of traditional values and beliefs becomes increasingly reliant on symbolic cultural and religious content borne by media products, particularly TV. An invaluable attempt has been made to analyse the images of Muslims reported in the British press by Poole (2002). However, little consideration has been paid to analysis

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of national terrestrial TV broadcasting in general. Therefore, this article attempts to explore the various dimensions of some ‘documentary’ descriptions of Muslims in Britain, adopting Halliday’s modernist model and applying ‘qualitative document analysis’.

It is important to explain that Muslim images in British broadcasting are far more complex than merely the study of documentaries can show. British broadcasting contains various terrestrial and satellite channels showing a variety of programmes including news and current affairs programmes, films, documentaries, and games shows. Although, each genre of programme, and indeed each programme, might contain images about Islam and/or Muslims, their different roles make them more difficult to compare (Said 1981:3–12).

My focus specifically on documentaries is useful and appropriate because this genre of programme has been specifically made to inform consumers. I chose to analyse the reporting of Muslim/non-Muslim relations within British produced documentaries that specifically focussed on Islam and/or Muslims. This is because it was interesting to know to what extent the programmes that have deliberately and explicitly been produced for the purpose of dissemination of information about Islam/Muslims meet the requirements for the ‘modernist’ approach, as described by Halliday (1999, 2002). It intends to explore the extent to which documentaries enforce an in-depth and disaggregated view of Muslims and whether they avoid the simplified, historicized and generalized views of Muslims that are recognised as potential causes for Islamophobia and/or ‘anti-Muslim’ sentiments (Fekete 2004). To understand these different views, it is important to consider existing approaches concerning Muslims’ place in the contemporary world. Terrestrial television was chosen because it is almost universally accessible within Britain.

The centrality of the media in cultural and political power, in general, and describing Muslim and non-Muslim relations, in particular, is the major concern of this article. The media, especially broadcasting through both visual and auditory, could be significant social actors and play major roles in the process of reinforcing boundaries by amplifying the danger; infusing the unitary image of identity for Muslims or non-Muslims; and taking a historical approach in reporting or broadcasting programmes related to Muslims and Islamophobia. In a vulnerable climate in which Islam has been a major focus for the globe in the post-9/11 era, particularly after the Madrid and London bombings, its way of reporting appears to be crucial in improving Muslim and non-Muslim relations. It is not pointless that almost all literature, which has paid attention to the relation between the two, has also considered the media’s significant role in this relation (Poole 2002; Poole and Richardson 2006). It is also important to know to what extent these sensational media approach the modernist model of viewing Muslims.

‘Modernist’ model

In order to have a more informed and positive relationship between the West and Islam, Halliday (1999, 2002) proposes a ‘modernist’ approach be taken. I have adopted this
approach because, firstly, it is theoretically compatible with recent attempts in social theory that emphasise ‘diversity’ and ‘difference’, such as Beckford (2003), Hervieu-Léger (2000), Asad (1993, 2003). Secondly, this approach could offer an appropriate practical framework to be used by the media to cover issues related to the Muslim world and to challenge the uniformed views on Islam. The core of the modernist approach is ‘diversity’ which moves away from the interrelated notions of ‘simplification’, ‘generalization’ and ‘historicization’.

(a) Simplification
The assumed ‘Muslim threat’ and ‘alarmism’ contain some negative characters that portray simplified views of Muslims, from the non-Muslim perspective. They include: ‘threatening’, ‘aggressive’, ‘terrorists’, ‘suicide bombers’, ‘women repressors’, ‘asylum-seekers’, ‘fanatics’ (Dalrymple 2004a, 2004b; Halliday 1999, 2002; Kilroy-Silk 2004) – as if most Muslims are subject to these characteristics, or that most of the people who have these features are Muslims. A Muslim nation may also be inaccurately presented with stereotypes being used to imply that its society is ruled by far more negative features, such as ‘limb amputation’, ‘loathsome’, ‘savages’, ‘animals’, ‘animal abusers’, ‘thieves’, ‘vile and primitive’, ‘pond scum’, ‘cancer’, ‘cockroach’, ‘scowl’ (Dalrymple 2004a:18–24). All these discussions have contributed to not only the growth of a distinctive anti-Muslim prejudice, often called ‘Islamophobia’ (Halliday 1999, 2002), but also to ‘anti-Muslim racism’ (Fekete 2004). Therefore, in this article, I use simplification to refer to the type of reporting that categorises Islamic people, or sets of beliefs, stereotypically.

(b) Generalization
Generalization is defined as a process according to which such simplified views are applied to all Muslims, regardless of their identity diversity. In such a process, Islam is dealt with as a ‘unitary object’ and Muslims are viewed as a single community. It seems that this is a matter of more concern for Halliday (1999, 2002), but also to ‘anti-Muslim racism’ (Fekete 2004). Therefore, in this article, I use simplification to refer to the type of reporting that categorises Islamic people, or sets of beliefs, stereotypically.

For him, there are many writers whose explicit or implicit theories could, deliberately or unwittingly, exacerbate or limit Muslims’ isolation in this global village. Some theoreticians or commentators tend to claim, sometimes generalising any misfortunate event occurring among Muslims or in an Islamic country to the whole Islamic world, that Muslims do not fit into the ‘universal civilization’ (e.g. Huntington 1996; Kilroy-Silk 2004). These commentators tend to ignore Muslim diversity in terms of ethnicity, class, sect and interpretations of the text, particularly in relation to the modern world. In fact, most of these writings assume a unitary identity for all Muslims. However, this stereotype is not one sided. Both the non-Muslim perspective and some Muslims, e.g. among British Pakistani youth, use this unitary identity for all Muslims as the basis of stereotypes (Jacobson 1998). Apart from the majority of non-Muslims (Poole 2002), even some Muslims tend to have a unitary view of themselves. This is influenced by
the notion of ‘ummah’ that suggests Muslims have a unitary interpretation of text and culture.

There are many writings, for the purpose of their argument at least, which have treated ‘Islam’ as a unitary object and Muslims as a single community (e.g. Ahmed 1991, 1992; Barber 1995; Browning 1998; Gellner 1992; Sayyid 1997; The Runnymede Trust 1997; Turner 1991, 1994). While some of them have adhered to a more tolerant and informed relation to the Muslim world through inter-faith dialogue and race relations, such as reports by The Runnymede Trust (1997) and Wilton Park (Browning 1998), most of them have followed a less emollient line. Bobby Sayyid (1997) argues that the notion of an Islamic threat is a Eurocentric response by the West because its hitherto undisputed domination of the Muslim world is being challenged by Muslims. This is known as ‘the return of the repressed’. Therefore, for him, Eurocentrism is not the result of historical Western hegemony, but acts as a sign of its decline, which paves the way for Islamism – a form of modernity that is non-Western. Ahmed (1992), Gellner (1992) and Turner (1991, 1994) define Islamic fundamentalism as an Islamic response to post-modernism. For Barber (1995), and similarly Turner (1991, 1994), Jihad is an Islamic anti-consumerist response to McWorld’s consumerism. However, Barber’s view of Islam is incompatible with Huntington’s (1996) simplified theory on the clash of civilizations, because Islam’s allegedly universalistic tendencies have historically tolerated religious minorities. These views implicitly or explicitly expose a unitary identity for Muslims and tend to ignore the diversity of a billion Muslims, divided into more than 50 states, numerous ethnicities and social groups, countless interpretations of the text, particularly in relation to the modern world, with different backgrounds of sect, class and gender. For instance, Godazgar and Fathi’s (2005) research illustrates how ethnicity, besides religion, played a significant role in shaping identity and shifting balance between ethnic and religious boundaries among young women from Sunni-Kurdish, Shi’ite-Turkish and Christian-Armenian backgrounds in North-west Iran.

In contrast to the unitary approach of Islam, some literature emphasises the diversity of Muslim societies. For example, Kai Hafez’s (1997) Islam and the West presents different approaches taken by different Muslim countries in political thought, terrorism and economics, the status of women, and foreign policies, while Islam and the West in the Mass Media (Hafez 1999) looks at different Muslim countries and their strategic priorities taken by their mass media. Said’s (1981) Covering Islam portrays Western societies’ media ‘interpretation’ of Islam as ‘simplified’, ‘generalised’ and ‘Orientalist’, and reluctant to acknowledge Islam as diverse in concept, identity and history.

While these books stress diversity between Muslim societies, N. and H. Pope’s (1997) work has concentrated on diversity within an Islamic society: Turkey. Turkey has different trends of political ideology resulting from the tensions of modernity: secular state; Islamic opposition and equally Muslim, but politically secular, Kurdish opposition. While the unitary-oriented literature of Muslims provides an appropriate context to contain anti-Muslim stereotypes, the analysis of the diversity-oriented literature enables us to move away from stereotypes and challenge confrontation. Therefore, it is highly important to know how Islam and/or Muslims are treated in the British
terrestrial documentaries in terms of diversity. Are they presented as diverse or as if they are members of a single and unified community?

(c) Historicization

Historicization is meant as a process of linking ‘contemporary hostility to Muslims to the long history of conflict between «Islam» and the West’ (Halliday 1999, 2002), particularly the Crusades and the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683. This approach limits recognition of the diversity of history in terms of relationships between Islam and the West. By ‘historicization’, I do not mean that history is not important, but that it is problematic to link present-day tensions to troubles of the past. This implies a permanence of the conflict. Secondly, the ‘past provides a reserve of reference and symbol for the present, it does not explain it’ (Halliday 1999:895); for instance, the Crusades do not explain the current political debate, it is simply used to reinforce prejudice and beliefs. Thirdly, it tends to ignore the historical national differences of both perspectives. From the Western perspective, there have been significant differences of chauvinism towards Muslims depending on the colonial histories, the composition of immigrant groups and geographical location (Halliday 1999:896). Depending on their host societies, Muslims’ issues of conflict vary: veiling in France; anti-Arab racism in the US; Turkish-Kurdish opposition in Germany, and the Rushdie affair in the UK (Lewis and Schnapper 1994). Finally, historicization ignores not only the diversity of history, but also the diversity of identity. Islam is undoubtedly a part of Muslim identity, but it is not the sole factor. Other parts, such as ethnicity, class and gender, play significant roles as much as and, at least sometimes, more than religious identity among Muslims. Indeed, understanding the politics of different Islamic countries is impossible by focusing on Islam alone. Therefore, the claim of a unitary Islamic identity is a misrepresentation, if it implies its primacy and a common and/or given interpretation of Islam. Thus, this article also focuses on the extent to which British documentaries on Islam attribute the present disturbances to the tensions of the past.

Halliday’s (1999, 2002) approach, in contrast, with its emphasis on diversity, is less general and less absolute than is often represented by patriarchal, sectarian and self-appointed parts of Muslim societies (e.g. Jacobson 1998). This approach resists the single interpretation of Islam. Inspired by Aziz al-Azmeh’s (1993) understanding of shariah, which is subject to many and contingent interpretations, Halliday (2002:22) suggests that ‘there is no one shariah [as the symbol of Islamism] which Islamists can invoke.’ Perhaps the most convincing part of Halliday’s analysis is the intersection of identities. For him, a study that concentrated solely on religion would miss the reality of identity, such as work, ethnicity, gender, location, and, the ways in which different Muslims relate to each other (Halliday 1999:897). Indeed, a modernist study of different Islamic communities in the UK, would illustrate that there would be as much difference as commonality among them.

The modernist reading of relations between Islam and the West offers more hope for the improvement of relations. According to this approach, ‘globality’, as a characteristic of modernity, is the result of a more interactive framework, in which different
cultures, including elements from Islamic civilization, have played roles. Therefore, this ‘inter-civilizational’ model attempts to establish the long-standing dialogue and more horizontal relations between the two. This model has also been welcomed by a number of Muslim scholars like Karim (2002), Pasha and Samatar (1997).

**Research Methods**

I concentrated on documentaries that focused on Islam, as a first step to explore whether the modernist approach outlined above was being utilised. I was curious to understand to what extent these programmes specifically reporting on Islam represent the images that are compatible with the modernist approach – and how, and to what extent, such documentaries were involved in simplified, generalized and historicized views of Islam.

| Table 1. Model for evaluating documentaries in terms of non-modernist approach |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| **Simplification**          | Involves alarmism           |
|                             | Includes negative features  |
|                             | Intolerance of others       |
| **Generalization**          | Islam as a unitary object   |
|                             | Muslims as a single community |
|                             | Ignores the diversity of identity (ethnicity, class, gender and sect) |
|                             | Ignores the diversity of concepts and interpretations of the text |
|                             | Ignores the diversity of cultures and states |
| **Historicization**         | Linking contemporary tensions to the past |
|                             | Ignores the diversity of history in terms of relations |
|                             | Ignores historical national differences |

The documentaries were chosen using a simple random sample, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This is the most relevant method of sampling for qualitative documentary analysis, when only one type of media – ‘semiotics’ (Manning and Cullum-Swan 1994) – is being analysed (Altheide 1996:7). In this method, the frequency and representativeness of documentaries are not the major concern, but their conceptual adequacy is. Therefore, an investigation of a sample of 14 reports was sufficient to extend it to the entire period under consideration (September 2001-September 2004), after the key elements had been identified and applied to the data gathering protocol (Altheide 1996:36) as such programmes are not frequently broadcast on British terrestrial TV.

The libraries of the British University Film and Video Council and the Film and Documentary Reservation of the University of East London were contacted about
appropriate documentaries. Out of the existing 25 programmes on Islam at the time, using simple random method, I selected a sample of 14 programmes, reported as ten documentaries, based on the inclusion criteria: relevant to the conceptual framework; being broadcasted from terrestrial British TV; broadcast post-9/11; and aimed to familiarize watchers with Islam.² I treated all programmes selected in the same way, preventing prioritisation of programmes or issues, in line with the research method. At the time of doing this research, the London bombing had not yet occurred. Each individual programme, as a unit of analysis, was stratified according to the key themes to capture the meanings, stresses and subjects of messages in relation to Islam and to understand the organisation and process of how they were presented.

I familiarised myself with the data by watching and listening carefully, repeatedly and thoroughly to all the documentaries. When relevant segments to key conceptual elements (simplification, generalization and historicization) were identified, they were transcribed, coded, compared and contrasted to identify key differences, similarities and extremes for analysis. A brief summary was written for each documentary to ease data handling. Where documentaries were transmitted as a series of programmes, each programme was summarised and then amalgamated within their documentary group. Finally, the findings were integrated according to the theoretical framework and key concepts.

British documentary coverage of Islam

Although Britain is in need of more information than has been presented by the British broadcasting media under the auspices of these documentaries, nevertheless these broadcasted documentaries display an image of Muslims that might, in general, be related to the modernist approach. While only one of the 14 reports did not utilise the modernist approach and two contained elements from both modernist and non-modernist approaches, eleven of them contributed to the modernist notions to some extent. In other words, one of the 14 reports lacked the characteristics of the modernist approach in general; eleven of them contributed to parts of the modernist approach in each programme in varying degrees from one programme to another; and two of them held elements from both modernist and non-modernist approaches.

(a) Unitary Approach

The documentary entitled ‘This World: Saudi: The Family in Crisis’ is a report from Saudi Arabia which adhered to the not-modernist approach in general. As such, it did little to build a sustainable and trust-based relation between Muslims and non-Muslims. It shows a very conservative facet of Islam, which is highly resistant to promoting women’s equality, democracy and human rights issues. It also portrays the Saudi government as involved in fighting against, on the one hand, terrorists and, on the other, intellectuals.
The unitary image of Muslims becomes evident when the Presenter (Simon Reeve) states that, due to the Saudi government’s efforts, support for terrorism in Saudi Arabia is declining and makes a hope that, by doing so, support in other Islamic countries will also be declining: ‘[s]upport for the extremists is declining now they have killed other Muslims. If the Royal family’s crackdown is supported, and the people of this holy Kingdom turn aggressively against al Qaeda, sympathy for extremism across the rest of the Islamic world could also collapse.’ This claim is also repeated on the BBC website about this documentary: ‘As the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammed, the country is the focus of attention for the Muslim world, and a serious backlash against terrorism in the holy kingdom has huge significance for the global «war on terror»’ (Reeve 2004). This suggests the unitary image of Islam with Saudi Arabia at its core and may assume that if Saudi Arabia support terrorism Muslims from other Islamic societies could have sympathy with terrorism. Saudi Arabia is significant for Muslims for being the birthplace of Islam and the Prophet Mohammad, and for having «ka’aba», towards which all Muslims face to pray five times a day. Nonetheless, this does not offer a Saudi socio-political system, Saudi government or even Saudi clergy ‘spiritual leadership to 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide’ (emphasised by me), as it is claimed by the writer (Reeve 2004).

Despite this programmes shortcomings in relation to the modernist approach, it briefly says that Saudi Arabia is highly under the influence of Wahhabism and recognised that Wahhabism constituted only a fraction of Muslims. It did, therefore, recognise the diversity of Muslims in the Islamic world, although it seemed totally sightless of diversity within Saudi Arabia.

(b) Mixed Approach

The two documentaries that contained mixed elements from both categories were: ‘The Last White Kids’ and ‘I met Osama Bin Laden’. The title of the former and the pictures of Muslim dominated schools where only a few white English pupils attend, give the impression that all of Britain, or at least Bradford, has been dominated by Muslims and just a few white people are left. However, Manningham, where the documentary has been produced, is an overwhelmingly Asian district.

It is a story about white children who are growing up where nearly every one else is Muslim. This documentary claims that girls react differently from boys in response to their environment; ‘rather than tolerating Islam, boys want to fight it’, while girls show more than tolerance of Islam and Muslims. Eleven-year-old Jake and his cousin John have divided the world into two groups: the ‘Pakis’ (Muslims, seem to ‘go to the mosque a million times a day’, who ‘fast and pray and have to watch what they eat’), and the ‘Porkies’ (who can be white, black and mixed race, but what unites them is that they are not Muslims and they ‘can eat pork’). Such a division portrays a simplified image of Muslims and even the world, although it is stated in the form of children’s words. It is also one-sided. Although the documentary attempts to highlight some problems of White families in the few Asian-dominated areas of Britain, it would be equally interesting to hear Asian families’, particularly children’s, problems in the vast White-
dominated locations. Nonetheless, it ends with phrases that are very much associated with the ‘modernist’ approach. For example, a female white pupil, Ashley, who enthusiastically attends Mosque classes, states: ‘It does not matter what colour you are. You should all respect each other. The world would not end so soon, if there was peace and it would have gone forever and there would be heaven in this world.’ This programme generally portrayed a unitary view of Muslim in the different forms of ‘Islam’, ‘Asians’, ‘Bengalis’, ‘Pakistanis’. However, non-Muslims were presented as diverse in terms of their reactions towards Muslims.

The documentary ‘I met Osama Bin Laden’ is informative about Bin Laden’s school life in Jedda (a city in Saudi Arabia) and his ‘journey from moderate Islamic youth to ruthless leader of world jihad’, (Maloney 2004), and his extremist ideas of killing, even innocent people. It draws on information from journalists who had succeeded in meeting him: Robert Fisk, Rahimullah Yusufzai, Scott MacLeod, Abdel Bari Atwan, Hamid Mir and Ahmad Zaidan. But it takes on the ‘simplified’ and ‘generalised’ direction when the commentator (Michael Maloney), whilst showing pictures of the explosions of the American Embassies in East Africa (Kenya and Tanzania) on 7th August 1998 during which 231 people were killed, says ‘these events made Muslims happy throughout the world’. This displays a unitary identity and image of Muslims as if all Muslims support terrorism.

(c) Modernistic Approach

All of the remaining eleven reports portrayed partly modernist approach to understanding Muslims. Each of them attempted to provide an in-depth, rather than simplified, view of Muslims, to stress the recent, instead of historicized, feature of the conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims. They also displayed Islam as being composed of diverse communities.

The documentaries ‘A Muslim in the Family’, narrated by Rageh Omaar, and ‘Turning Muslim in Texas’, presented by Mark Halliley, feature four converts respectively in Britain and the US. At this time, when there is a ‘climate of threat, fear and misunderstanding’ (Poole and Richardson 2006:1) and the major concern is ‘the clash of civilisations’ (Huntington 1996), converts may symbolize a living bridge between Islam and the West. Both documentaries challenge the very simplified and incorrect images of Islam by giving voices to converts and showing friendly relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. For instance, in ‘A Muslim in the Family’, Yvonne Ridley, a journalist who converted to Islam, stated that she failed to find anything against women’s rights in the Qur’an. This questions the allegedly ‘women oppressor’ feature of Islam, as is claimed by such writers as Kilroy-Silk (Halliday 2006:24). Moreover, in ‘Turning Muslim in Texas’, Erick, a convert, described his positive relationship with his work colleagues, thus, countering the view that different religious beliefs prevent peaceful relationships from developing. However, the word ‘turning’ in the title could be taken to imply that the convert is turning their back on societal norms.

These documentaries explained that Islam was a peaceful religion, but it showed the parents’ of converts concerns that by becoming Muslim implied they had joined al-
Qaeda (Omaar 2004; Halliley 2004). More interestingly, both documentaries proved that there was not necessarily, a contradiction between Islam and the West. For example, by interviewing some converts who described themselves as both Muslim and Texan, or Muslim and British, these converts did not recognise any contradiction between their Islamic faith and their belief in Western culture.

The documentaries ‘Letter to America’ and ‘Letter from America’, mirror and complement each other: the former from the Muslim perspective and the latter from the American view. They attempt to challenge the simplified, generalized and historicized images of Muslims, and their relations with non-Muslims, by stressing the political and economic, rather than religious, nature of the conflict and its ‘recent’ characteristics.

In ‘Letter to America’, ‘Syrian born writer, Rana Kabbani, returns to the Middle East to find out how Muslims have come to view the United States. Her journey takes her to Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Iran.’ (Kabbani 2001). In Cairo, in replying to Bush’s question ‘why do they hate us?’, Ahdaf Soueif, the Booker-nominated Egyptian novelist, says: ‘As far as everybody is concerned here this is not Islam versus the West, this is not a clash of civilizations. It has got nothing to do with hating America or hating the West. It is all to do with foreign policies and ambitious strategies of the US in this part of the world’. Even a leader of the banned Muslim Brotherhood, Essam al-Aryan, denounces the attack of 9/11: ‘There was big sympathy with victims of 11 September. Hizbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad fighters are fighting for liberation of their land and this is «just» fighting. What happened in New York is terrorism, a terrible incident. It is against Islam and all religions.’

This programme suggests that the current hostilities have nothing to do with religion, and ancient events, such as the crusades, but are due to ‘US foreign policy’ in the recent decades, showing pictures of the US bombardment of the Aamirriya shelter in Baghdad, in which more than 400 civilians were burned alive. It is accompanied with haunting music composed and played by an Iraqi musician (Nasseer Shamma) who had witnessed the bombing. It also presents pictures about the US involvement in the coup d’état of 1953 against the ‘liberal government of Dr Mohammad Mosaddiq’ of Iran. This ‘US foreign policy’, according to the programme, tries to occupy Islamic lands for economic and political aims, rather than being concerned about religious character. For justification of this, for example, Dr. Mohajerani of Iran points out the paradoxical statements about Pakistani President presented by the US President: ‘... When Bush was elected he did not know who the President of Pakistan was. Then he called Musharraf a dictator. And then, Musharraf is now America’s sweetheart.’

The Presenter (Rana Kabbani) says, while showing pertinent pictures from Egypt: ‘[t]he world is made up of entwining cultures. The West we know has become heavily influenced by Islamic knowledge and innovation, and Arab and Islamic societies have deeply been affected by Western ideas’. She also criticises the ‘black and white’ division of the world and the theory of the clash of civilizations. For example, a Palestinian refugee in the UAE, shows empathy and sympathy for the loss suffered in the US 9/11 event, when he says: ‘Oh! Americans! We feel your pain [implying the event of 9/11]....’ However, he also highlights the problem of dividing the world into ‘good and evil’ when he continues by saying: ‘[i]sn’t it the time you feel ours??’ Furthermore, this
journalist’s journey to different Islamic countries in this documentary portrays the notion of Muslims’ diversity.

In ‘A Letter from America’, Bonnie Greer examines the rift between America and the Muslim world from the perspective of ordinary Americans. She is passionate in her defence of America as a country of opportunity and liberalism, which is as much misunderstood as it is ignorant of the outside world. She challenges the notion of America as «The Great Arrogance» (Greer 2001). It portrays the full dilemma of American interviewees about why the event of 9/11 happened. Interviews are conducted with members of American families, school pupils, university students, the Presenter’s older classmates and personal friends and relatives. They claim that neither their education nor the media gave them the information they needed in this regard. Therefore, the reporter (Bonnie Greer), who began as defender of America’s position as victims and as ignorant about external events, found interviewees were confused and critical of the sensationalist media which gave little information about the realities of the Muslim world: ‘What I said on the television and radio to everyone who would listen was that America had been bombed into the world, ready to become a true world citizen. But what I found during the making of «Letter from America» was something completely different’ (Greer 2001).

Disappointed at not finding any in-depth report in the American media, while she is flicking through the magazines and newspapers, Bonnie Greer says: ‘the media should not act as the government’s agents. The media manufactures in you the feeling of how safe you are and, on the other hand, it saves you from Islamic fundamentalism. Instead of going and sitting down and asking hard, nasty and unpleasant questions, we get entertainment values kicking in: so now America is at war. America kicks back …’.

In an interview with Bonnie Greer, one of the biggest broadcasters in Chicago, Warner Saunders, states: ‘we don’t turn inward and say why you think they did that [referring to the event of 9/11] to us. What was the reason? We don’t look at it in that manner. And I think that comes from being such a young country … We’re teenager in the world and we’ve gotten so much, so fast, and done so much. You give us a fast car and we drive it too fast and the rest of the people are saying why the hell are you driving that car so fast. Because I can.’ In replying to the Presenter’s question ‘people abroad say that we need to change, what is your idea?’, he remarks: ‘of course, we need to change, and we are going to change if we’re going to be able to survive. I am only giving you my personal opinion on this one. The failure for us to deal adequately with the issue of race and the issue of diversity may be the very reason for the trouble that we’re in. And this country has never truly dealt with the issue of race. I think racism and sexism are the twin towers of infamy for this country. And unless we deal with it, we are going to have a serious problem.’

Or an old friend from the Chicago Black Ensemble, Jackie Taylor told her: ‘This [implying 9/11] didn’t come out of the blue. There is a reason for it... You cannot trust what you see on the TV, you cannot trust what you read in the paper. We have to learn how to investigate…. What goes around comes around... There is a small percentage of the people at the top and they are the ones that are waging this craziness at the expense of the billions of people who are on the earth and who want peace.’ Finally,
the documentary ends with the Reporter’s (Bonnie Greer) conclusion: ‘I heard in Chicago, talk about tackling racism, hatred and ignorance, and people who talked about fear and America’s desperate need to change.’ This proves how deeply, at least a part of, America suffers from the simplified images of Islam and Muslims but, at the same time, it is thirsty for information and equality.

In the two-part documentary of ‘Out of the shadows’, John McCarthy returns to Lebanon, where he had been taken hostage in 1986 by the Islamic Jihad, and goes to Iraq and Iran to explore Shi’ism. By challenging the simplified and unitary or generalized images of Shi’ite Muslims, he succeeds in combating stereotypes against Shi’ite Muslims: ‘although Shi’ite people are a majority in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, they are in the minority in the Muslim world surrounded by a majority of Sunnis. Their most common strategy had not been one of confrontation and the desire to dominate, but, instead, one of peace and accommodation. I wonder whether prejudice has played with our responses to the actions of the few people to give us a distorted view of the majority. That familiar problem of our own, ignorance, is leading us towards an unjustified hostility to the unknown other’.

In the illusion of the Shi’ite extremist group of Moqtada Sadr in Iraq, a historical account of Shi’ism, its rituals and their relations with other religious groups could be helpful to avoid stereotypes against Shi’ite Muslims. Showing pictures of Sheikh Fazlollah’s, one of the prominent Shi’ite clerics in Lebanon, speech about Imam Ali’s, the first Shi’ite Imam, recommendation on the tolerance of different religious faiths in the mosque, it tries to prove that the intolerant and challenging action of a minority of Muslims around the world has nothing to do with Islam and Shi’ism. He also found no evidence of installing hatred in young minds in his visit to a Shi’ite class taught by a veiled Shi’ite teacher.

Portraying a religious ceremony in a mosque in Lebanon, John McCarthy says: ‘although I have found no clear religious faith of my own, I cannot fail to be impressed by the atmosphere of connections generated around me: the people’s connections to each other and through the Imams, to the Prophet Mohammad and to God. This feeling of belonging and love moves me.’ Apart from challenging the simplified view of Muslims, it also combats the unjustified historicized images of Muslim-Christian relations through the Crusades. In brief, this documentary represents a modernist approach of relations between Muslim and non-Muslims by portraying Muslim’s diversity and challenging generalization and simplification.

In the two-part documentary ‘Islam unveiled’, Samira Ahmed shows Muslims’ diversity by travelling across the Islamic world to uncover the stories of Muslim women in Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan and Egypt. For example, while some Turkish women fight for ‘the right to wear the hijab’ in official places, some Iranian women demand ‘the right to burn the hijab’. However, in the multi-cultural society of Malaysia, or the countries of Pakistan and Egypt with different socio-political systems, for a Muslim woman the hijab is not a major problem. For instance, poverty is a major issue for a Muslim woman from Kelantan in Malaysia, even though the elected Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS, Parti Islam SeMalaysia) wishes to enforce women veiling and sex-segregation and to ban women’s singing and wearing clothes that may expose their
bodies. Considering people’s tendency to ignore these strict codes, the Presenter asks the very crucial question of why they voted for the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). For her, poverty is one of the reasons. In fact, ‘radical Islam has taken the place of Marxism in Kelantan because Islam is seen as uncorrupted’. But it does not mean that Malaysian Muslims are not diverse in Kelantan society and/or Muslim women have sympathy with Islamic fundamentalism: ‘there is real opposition to the fundamentalists and it comes from fellow-Muslims. «Sisters in Islam» are a pressure group who combines the vigour of Western feminism with practical Malay Islam.’

In Iran, as it is portrayed, where many Muslim women fight for equal rights with men under the theocratic government, some prominent clerics, like Ayatollah Sanei, have no choice other than to recognise some of these rights, at least: women’s rights to be judges, equal compensation rights for women with men and a shift in women’s age for performing religious commitment from nine to about thirteen – the age that brings changes in physical appearances. While the Iranian part can hardly envisage any degree of contradiction between Islam and modernity, according to the programme, Turkey does represent such a contradiction. For example, some Turkish journalists find Islam incompatible with democracy and secularism. Such a claim is highlighted when it shows pictures of students who were expelled from a medical school for being veiled. At the same time, it is a matter of some controversy for a member of the Justice and Development Party (AK), Nimet Gubukay, who cannot believe that this huge part of the society, allegedly between 60 and 70% of the Turkish women, could be ignored. In brief, this documentary is a successful one in presenting diversity among Muslims and Islamic societies.

In contrast to all documentaries with regard to Muslims and their relations with the West, which have been broadcast from British TV, the three-part documentary ‘The Power of Nightmares’ provides a stronger version of the modernist approach by including more dimensions than the others and by portraying an unusual image of relations between Muslims and the West, which I believe represents a revolution in TV broadcasting in relation to Islam. After making ‘more than a thousand references’ to ‘dirty bomb[s]’ in the British national press since 9/11 (Beckett 2004), producer and presenter, Adam Curtis, claims that alarmism is itself a ‘fantasy’ and ‘illusion’ which has been invented by politicians, mainly the American Neo-Conservatives: ‘British and American governments have distorted and exaggerated the real nature of the threat. There are dangerous and fanatical groups around the world who have been inspired by the extremist Islamist theories and they are prepared to use the techniques of mass terror on civilians. The bombing in Madrid shows this only too clearly, but this is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the way American and other governments have transformed this complex and disparate threat into a simplified fantasy of an organised web of uniquely powerful terrorists who can strike anywhere and at any moment. But no one questions this fantasy, it was serving the interests of so many people’, claims Adam Curtis. However, he admits that there are ‘anxieties’. This documentary gets to grips with all images of ‘simplification’, ‘historicization’ and the unitary identity of Muslims by providing an unusual insight to the Islamic world, which is highly in-depth
and modern. It stands against those commentators, like Halliday (1999:895), who deny
that the current hostilities towards Islam can be attributed to the end of the Cold War.

In the first part, Adam Curtis looks at the origins of neo-conservatism and Islamic
fundamentalism and how they were born from ideas similar to those of Leo Strauss and
Seyyed Qutb about ‘the failure of liberalism’, ‘destructive force of individualism’ and
how they could prevent it. Leo Strauss felt that to combat this, the American people
needed to be given a shared sense of struggle and responsibility, even if these were fic-
titious. Qutb increasingly believed that not only Governments but also the people had
become corrupted and therefore, they were legitimate targets in the struggle to free
Muslim societies from individualism, selfish desires and ignorance (jahiliyah) (Curtis
2004a). In the second part, both ideologies joined forces in the 1980s to combat the
Soviets in Afghanistan and both claimed responsibility for the collapse of the so-called
‘evil’ Soviet Union. After this, the Islamists failed to win the support of the Muslim
public for their violent activities in Islamic countries, and so they decided to attack the
West in order to win public support (Curtis 2004b). In the final part, the neo-conserva-
tives used this in order to create a new enemy that the USA had to fight and defeat,
while making the enemy seem much stronger than they really are (Curtis 2004c).

Conclusion

In general, the key conceptual elements developed by Halliday and other theoreticians
contributed considerably to an in-depth understanding of the images of Muslims in ter-
restrial television’s British documentary programmes. It is clear from the research,
described in this article, that these programmes pursued a modernist approach and
avoided portraying a simplified, historicized and unitary portrait of Islam in general.
However, the majority of them only avoided in part, various aspects of the stereotypical
or simplified approach that can promote Islamophobia. Nevertheless, it is also impor-
tant to be aware that not all of these programmes presented Islam and Muslims in their
fully diverse forms of identity such as ethnicity, sect, class, gender, education, and geo-
graphical locations. They were, therefore, a distance from assisting in the development
of a context in which both Muslims and non-Muslims can peacefully live together – in
the main, the issue of difference was highlighted while commonalities were entirely
neglected.

The issue of ‘diversity’, which has been considered as the core of modernist view
of Islam by Halliday, needs to be elaborated from three different dimensions: concep-
tual complexity; diversity of Muslim identity; diversity of Muslim and non-Muslim
relation in history. Firstly, in terms of conceptual complexity, it is difficult to define
‘Islam’ itself, in its composite structure: ‘in fact [it] is part fiction, part ideological
label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam’ (Said 1981:x) and there is no
consensus on which one is which. People who call for the world to accept ‘true’ and
‘pure’ Islam do not, and indeed, cannot, define what they mean by that. Secondly, the
diversity of Muslims’ identity has become increasingly complex. For example, Said
says:
In no really significant way is there a direct correspondence between the «Islam» in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam, with its more than 800,000,000 people, its millions of square miles of territory principally in Africa and Asia, its dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies, cultures (Said 1981:x).

Thirdly, in addition to the complexities in the concept and identity diversity of Muslims, it may be impossible to define Islam in association with its relationships with non-Muslims, considering their diverse forms in history. Therefore, considering all these complexities, it would be perhaps unrealistic to expect media, including documentaries, to address ‘diversity’, in all its complex forms. However, the given documentaries do contribute to the ‘diversity’ paradigm in general, though with varying degrees from one programme to another.

Of course, this does not mean that all other British TV programmes, including both terrestrial and satellite ones, would have the same results and characteristics. Rather, they, particularly news reports on Islam and Muslims across the world and US-produced movies, are the subject of serious questions in this regard (see Poole 2002). Indeed, they are a matter of urgent investigation by more subtle tools of theoretical sampling, research method and analysis. This research may be considered as the first step in that direction.

Nevertheless, the results of this research illustrate that documentary programmes broadcast from British terrestrial TV, regardless of what times of the day or night they were broadcast and what variety or extent of audiences they attracted, provide a ‘modernist’ and ‘diverse’ approach towards Muslims overall. The approach adopted by British documentaries may be taken as a starting-point example by other types of media in Britain and possibly by other European societies, particularly if they are the hosts of a Muslim minority. Finally, despite all the terrible incidents that have occurred in the name of Islam in the recent years, this research illustrates that it is wrong to think that only dreadful or racist pictures of Islam could be found in the West.

Notes
1. The alternative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is stratified random sampling. This is used when more than one media type is being analysed and so was not as appropriate for this study, despite it generally being considered the preferred approach.
2. They were as follows: Letter to America (BBC Two, Sunday 9 December 2001 at 1915 BST); Letter from America (BBC Two, Sunday 16 December 2001 at 1915 BST); The Last White Kids (Channel Four, 30 October 2003 at 2100 BST; second screening: 11 December 2003 at 0410 BST); the two-part Islam Unveiled (Channel Four, Monday 19 January 2004 at 0014 BST and Tuesday 20 January 2004 at 0053 BST; second screening: Wednesday 5 May 2004 at 0110 BST and Wednesday 12 May at 0125 BST); the two-part Out of Shadows (ITV One, Easter Sunday 11 April 2004 at 2315 BST and Sunday 28 November 2004 at 1215 BST); A Muslim in the Family (BBC One, Sunday 2 May 2004 at 2330 BST); This World: Saudi: The Family in Crisis (BBC Two, Thursday 15 July 2004 at 2100 BST); Turning Muslim in Texas (Channel Four, 14 January 2004 at 1800 BST); I met Osama Bin Laden (BBC Two, Sunday 28 March 2004 at 2000 BST); and the three-part The Power of Nightmares
(BBC Two, Wednesdays 20, 27 October and 3 November 2004 at 2100 BST). All the programmes are UK productions. Presenters for all of them are non-Muslims, with the exception of ‘Letter to America’ and ‘Islam Unveiled’. Participants in all of them are mixed of both Muslims and non-Muslims, with the exception of ‘Islam Unveiled’ and ‘Out of Shadows’, of which the participants are only Muslims.

3. In the post-9/11 era, Wahhabism is widely believed as the most intolerant of non-Muslims and even all other interpretations of Islam, particularly Sufism and Shi’ism (DeLong-Bas 2004:3-5), although DeLong-Bas (2004:281-283) concludes that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s stress on the importance of Islamic values has nothing to do with Bin Laden’s invitation to global jihad against non-Muslims and other Islamic sects or cults.

References


