



# Unveiling the American-Muslim press: News agendas, frames, and functions

Journalism  
2015, Vol. 16(7) 884–903  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1464884914545376  
jou.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

The growing scholarly literature on Muslims and the media in the United States has paid little attention to the American-Muslim press. This study compares the coverage of two major American-Muslim publications, the bimonthly news magazine *Islamic Horizons* and the weekly tabloid *Muslim Journal*, at four key moments beginning with 9/11. Content analysis ( $N=576$ ) indicates both publications are overwhelmingly US-centric, focusing on domestic political and community affairs rather than the so-called 'Muslim world'. Aiding Muslim assimilation into American society emerges as the most important function of the American-Muslim press. However, *Muslim Journal* attends almost exclusively to black Muslims while *Islamic Horizons* emphasizes the coverage of immigrant Muslims from the Middle East and South Asia – reflecting and reproducing a historical schism within American-Muslim society. The study also reveals how minority media can reinforce power structures within the minority community and thus serve as a means of social control.

## Keywords

9/11, American-Muslim, Arab Spring, ethnic press, Islam, minority media

Weeks after the 9/11 attacks, the US Muslim Students' Association organized a lecture at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, entitled *Islam – The Source of Universal Peace*. Among the attendees was a woman clad in a *hijab*, the veil many Muslim women wear over their head and chest. What was remarkable about her was not the veil itself, which is common enough, but that it 'took the form of the American flag, the Stars and

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Stripes, emphasized by the shining blue garment that she wore under it' (Schmidt, 2004: 31). The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC, perpetrated by a group of Muslims, had famously led President George W Bush to wonder, 'Why do they hate us?' (Ford, 2001). This Muslim lecture participant was not simply offering an answer; she was challenging the 'they' versus 'us' premise of the question itself. And she was doing so in her own communicative style.

Over the past 13 years, much ink has been shed on being Muslim in the United States, especially on how the mainstream media cover the American-Muslim community (Chuang and Roemer, 2013; Kumar, 2010, 2012; Nacos and Torres-Reyna, 2002, 2007; Weston, 2003). But something vital has been missing from this discourse. How do American-Muslims cover themselves, in their own media? How do they cover the relationship between Muslims and America? What is their position on widely discussed issues such as 'Islamic terrorism' and 'Islamophobia?' Are these issues as important for them as they have been for the mainstream press? Importantly, is there a single-voice American-Muslim press, with a homogeneous news agenda and a common stance on issues pertaining to Muslims, or are multiple Muslim voices competing to be heard? As the woman in the *hijab* showed, Muslims are not just 'objects' of discussion: they have their own subjectivities, their own opinions and interpretations.

This study unveils the American-Muslim press with two interrelated purposes in mind. The first is to gain a broad understanding of the subjects and issues that American-Muslim media consider important and how they cover two issues that have been in the limelight nationally and internationally – Islamophobia and Muslim acts of violence (such as 9/11). The second is to explore the diversity of the American-Muslim press by looking at how a historical schism within American-Muslim society – between indigenous black Muslims and immigrant Muslims from the Middle East and South Asia – affects its coverage.

The latter purpose, in particular, has a deep theoretical significance. Studies of minority media typically envisage them as 'radical' and 'alternative' to the mainstream media (for reviews, see Atton, 2002; Deuze, 2006). In doing so, such studies end up ascribing an illusory uniformity to the media institutions of a minority group. They rarely explore minority media as reflective and reproductive of social structures *within* minority communities. But racial, linguistic, sectarian, and other cleavages within minority groups can influence their media institutions and media discourses. By drawing attention to the schism between immigrant and black American-Muslims and its impact on the American-Muslim press, this article extends the theoretical understanding of minority media and their social functions.

To do so, a content analysis of *Islamic Horizons* and *Muslim Journal*, two of the American-Muslim community's most well-established news publications, is presented here. While both publications are putatively 'Muslim/Islamic', the former is associated with a Muslim organization that is dominated by immigrants and the other started off as the mouthpiece of the nation's largest black Muslim movement. Such racial affiliations, this article demonstrates, bear upon their coverage in significant ways – with significant implications for their social and political role.

## Background

### *Muslims in the United States*

Muslims constitute a small but growing religious minority in the United States, numbering 2.75 million (Pew Research Center, 2011b) and expected to double by 2030 (Pew Research Center, 2011a). The first Muslims in America were black Africans, brought here as slaves by European colonizers in the sixteenth century (GhaneaBassiri, 2010). Their numbers have swelled in recent decades, largely due to the influx from the Middle East and South Asia following changes in US immigration law beginning in 1965 (Smith, 1999). The population today is highly diverse racially. Nearly two-thirds of American-Muslims are first- or second-generation immigrants, mostly from the Middle East and South Asia, while 13 percent are blacks born in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2011b). These statistics have social and political significance. Islam among the country's blacks has a history of its own – one that has run parallel, and sometimes contrary, to the so-called 'mainstream' Islam of the immigrants (Curtis, 2005; Lincoln, 1961). Popular black Muslim movements of the twentieth century, such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, have not been considered 'Islamic' by many immigrant Muslim institutions on account of sharp doctrinal disparities (Smith, 1999).

In the 1970s, the leader of Nation of Islam, the largest black Muslim group, turned to 'Sunni' Islam, the most populous Muslim sect globally, along with many of his followers in an attempt to iron out the differences with 'mainstream' Islam (GhaneaBassiri, 2010; Smith, 1999).<sup>1</sup> But the gulf between black and immigrant Muslims persisted. Khan (2002) noted that it was, in fact, becoming more entrenched. Black Muslims' 'opinions do not enjoy the same respect', there was a 'near absence of any intermarriage between blacks and immigrants', and charities run by immigrants 'raise(d) millions of dollars to send to foreign places but provide(d) very little charity at home' (pp. 20–21). In April 2001, many black leaders broke away from the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), an umbrella Muslim organization, to form the Muslim Alliance of North America (MANA). According to its mission statement, MANA was formed to 'pursue an agenda that reflects the points of view and experiences of the indigenous Muslims of North America and addresses their needs and aspirations' (Khan, 2002: 19).

### *Muslim press in the United States*

The American-Muslim press has had a checkered history. *The Moslem World*, the first American-Muslim newspaper, debuted in 1893 and made its name as a well-produced periodical that prompted general discourse about Muslims in the country, before folding up after seven issues (Singleton, 2007). Scores of American-Muslim news publications have been launched since then, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century (Nyang, 1999). These publications have been usually run by ethnic, national, or sectarian groups among Muslims, such as the Syrian Druze (*Al Bayan*), the Ahmadiyyas (*Muslim Sunrise*), and the Bosnian Muslims (*Glasnik Muslimana*). Most of them did not last more than a few years. New publications, such as *Elan*, *Azizah*, and *Muslim Girl*, continue to be launched (Sacirbey, 2008).

*Islamic Horizons (IH)* and *Muslim Journal (MJ)* are two of the community's longest running news publications. *IH* is a 64-page bimonthly news magazine, launched by

ISNA in 1983. It used to sell 50,000–55,000 copies per issue before 9/11, but sales have dwindled to around 9000 copies owing to financial constraints, according to its editor Omer Bin Abdullah (21 February 2013, personal communication). *MJ* is a tabloid-sized weekly newspaper, launched in 1960 by Nation of Islam as *Muhammad Speaks* (Lincoln, 1961). Following the group's transition to mainstream Islam, it was renamed as *Bilalian News* in 1975, as *American Muslim Journal* in the 1980s, and eventually as *Muslim Journal* (Smith, 1999).<sup>2</sup> Its readership has never gone below 35,000 copies per week, according to editor Ayesha K Mustafaa (24 March 2013, personal communication).

## Theoretical foundation

The decline of the mainstream press in the United States has coincided with the expansion of ethnic minority media in recent decades. Minority-run newspapers, radio, television, and online channels reached 57 million Americans in 2009, up from 51 million just 4 years earlier (New America Media, 2009). Their growth, fuelled by large-scale immigration from Latin America, Asia, and Africa and rapid changes in media technology, has also stimulated scholarly interest in their discourses, practices, and audiences (see, for instance, the special issue of *Journalism*, 2006).

Viswanath and Arora (2000) identified five functions of the minority press. The most basic of these functions is *informational*. The minority press provides information about developments taking place within the local community as well as in its homeland. Its second function is *cultural transmission*. The minority press gives coverage to festivals, celebrations, and other community events, helping 'revive' its ethnicity and maintain its culture and identity in the second generation. Its third function is that of a *community booster*. The minority press 'strives to present the community in a positive light, projecting an image of wholesomeness, success, and achievement' (Viswanath and Arora, 2000: 48). These include human interest features and profiles, success stories of immigrants, and volunteer work being done by immigrants either in the United States or in their homeland. As part of this function, the minority press also pays less attention to stories that reflect poorly upon the community.

Its fourth function is that of a *sentinel* – warning against threats to the community. This function is served through stories on crimes against immigrants, violations of immigrant rights, and changes in law that might affect them. The authors note that the extent of such coverage depends on the minority group's social status, mode of entry, and its subsequent experiences. For minorities that enjoy a high social status, immigrated voluntarily, and have largely had positive experiences in the United States, this function would be low on the press's news agenda. However, for a minority that has a lower social status, was forced to come to the United States as slaves, and has largely had a bad experience, the sentinel function would be a priority for its press.

Finally, the minority press facilitates *assimilation* into the so-called 'host' or local society. Assimilation often requires the minority community to adopt local symbols of identity, such as language, dressing styles, food habits, and behavior. The press facilitates this process by focusing on stories of community involvement in local politics, good relations between the homeland and the 'host' nation, as well as demonstrations of patriotism by members of the minority group.

The kind of stories that the minority press focuses on – its news agenda – therefore relates to its social and political functions. Viswanath and Arora (2000) make two other

important arguments. They draw attention to the complexity and heterogeneity within minority communities, particularly as they grow in size. Differences might exist on account of ethnicity, class, occupation, mother tongue, or some other factor imported from the homeland. They also argue that the minority press serves as a means of social control. By focusing on routine events, festivities, and success stories, it peddles 'information that does not primarily question the established community institutions and powerful groups within the community' (Viswanath and Arora, 2000: 47). Additionally, '[t]he ethnic press is likely to rely on merchants and businesses such as groceries, banks, travel agencies, and insurance agencies targeting the ethnic group and may not be inclined to offer a radical voice' (Viswanath and Arora, 2000: 49).

This 'critical functionalist' perspective<sup>3</sup> forms the analytical foundation of this article, used to study the general news agendas of *IH* and *MJ*. In addition, this article draws upon the theory of framing to look more closely at their coverage of two issues pertaining to Muslims that have been extensively covered by national and international media – 'Islamophobia' and 'Muslim acts of violence'. Simply put, framing is the idea that journalists and media organizations make decisions about how to structure a story, what to include and exclude from coverage, what to emphasize or play down. According to Entman (1993), '[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (p. 52).

The process of framing is significant in two ways. First, it reflects the underlying beliefs of the media as they go about their task of 'news making' (Tuchman, 1978). Viewed from this perspective, news is not simply an objective representation of an 'out there' reality but an ideological product manufactured inside the newsroom. Second, as news gets disseminated, the ideologies that go into its manufacture are also disseminated alongside. The media are thus implicated in a complex process through which particular beliefs and ways of looking at the world are reproduced and circulated through entire nations (or communities), while alternative perspectives are sidelined. Reese (2001), thus, defines frames as 'organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world' (p. 11).

## Literature review

### *US media coverage of Muslims*

Edward Said's (1981) groundbreaking study, *Covering Islam*, set the tone for research on the portrayal of Muslims in the mainstream American media. Said (1981) noted that US journalists viewed 'Islam' as a timeless, homogeneous entity, which allowed them to easily stereotype Muslims:

Muslims and Arabs are essentially covered, discussed, apprehended either as suppliers of oil or as potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Islamic world. (p. 26)

Said also argued that one reason why US journalists stereotyped Muslims was that unlike Europeans, who had colonized vast portions of Muslim-majority societies and witnessed large-scale Muslim immigration, very few Americans had actually had to deal with Muslims in the past.<sup>4</sup> But as the number of American-Muslims began to grow in recent decades, this factor no longer remained as relevant. Indeed, this social change began to reflect in media coverage too – at least for a while. News stories on Arab-Americans at the turn of the twenty-first century focused on the community's efforts to resist the 'terrorist' image, implying a normative concern with the stereotype that the media had themselves helped create (Weston, 2003). Even the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks saw a rise in both print and broadcast news stories portraying Arabs and Muslims positively (Nacos and Torres-Reyna, 2002).

But this change was short-lived. Positive stories began to ebb within 6 months of 9/11 and the tone turned negative once again by the first anniversary of the attacks (Nacos and Torres-Reyna, 2007). In the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, 'war on terror' became the defining frame of the relationship between Islam and the United States. The mainstream American press 'internalized' government policy (Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2008; Reese and Lewis, 2009) and became a tool of propaganda (Karim, 2006; Kumar, 2006). Islam was once again stereotyped as the antithesis of America and Muslims were targeted as the enemy (Akram, 2002; Chuang and Roemer, 2013; Hussain, 2010; Kassimeris and Jackson, 2011; Kumar, 2012; Powell, 2011; Seib, 2004).

As Aydin and Hammer (2010) noted, 'The othering of Muslims and the objectification experienced by Muslims in media products are of serious political and scholarly concern with implications for the lives of those involved' (p. 3). A vital aspect of the 'othering' and 'objectification' of Muslims is their treatment as a monolithic society, devoid of internal contours and fault lines. But that, as demographic and cultural studies show, is a misconception – both globally and within the United States. Large numbers of American-Muslims are immigrants from various parts of the world, with divergent cultures, sensibilities, and interpretations of Islam as a faith (Esposito and Mogahed, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2012). In addition, the American-Muslim society comprises white converts and a substantial black population, with their own perspectives on Islam and what it means to be a Muslim (Curtis, 2005; Lincoln, 1961; Smith, 1999). Mainstream media coverage of the American-Muslim community glosses over this diversity almost completely.

### *The American-Muslim press*

While there is an abundance of research on mainstream media portrayals of American-Muslims, surprisingly little scholarly work has been done on the American-Muslim media, even in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. There are a few notable exceptions, however. Malinovich (2006) conducted a qualitative analysis of American-Muslims' self-perception and self-representation in *IH* from its launch in 1983 until 2001. She found the magazine's focus to be more socio-cultural than religious or political. The dominant themes that she discerned were children's education and gender relations among young Muslims. The magazine was concerned with the 'moral relativism' that Muslim children were exposed to in American public schools, and called for opening more Islamic day schools. It also expressed fears about 'young women adopting 'un-Islamic' attitudes towards sex and marriage' (Malinovich, 2006: 106–107) – another reason for advocating

more Islamic schools. Nonetheless, the magazine's stance was not exclusivist but assimilatory. For instance, Islamic schools were envisaged as sites of cultural integration, where Muslim children would learn to imbibe 'positive' aspects of American culture with Islamic values and lifestyle. Malinovich (2006) was also aware that *IH* did not represent a cross-section of American-Muslim society, noting that '[t]his article focuses on Muslims of immigrant origins rather than black Muslims' (p. 111).

Kaufer and Al-Malki (2009) analyzed the Dearborn-based *Arab American News* as a 'counterpublic' to the mainstream American media's discourse on Arabs and Muslims. Their rhetorical analysis of 113 'terrorism stories' before and after 9/11 found that the newspaper 'nurtured a hybrid identity that combined patriotism for America with loyalty to Arabs of the diaspora and back in the Middle East' (Kaufer and Al-Malki, 2009: 61). While critical of US foreign policy, the newspaper did not offer a voice of resistance. This, the authors concluded, indicated lack of optimism that the mainstream American public was willing to listen to alternative narratives, although they did not offer any evidence to support this conclusion. Like Malinovich's, this study also conflated Arabs with Muslims. It also provided no sense of the newspaper's general news agenda, or the salience of the subject of terrorism within this agenda.

More recently, Echchaibi (2013) studied the *Muslimah Media Watch (MMW)* blog, launched in 2007 by an American-Muslim of Iranian descent that has grown quickly and counted 21 bloggers at the time the study was conducted. Most bloggers are from the United States, Europe, and Muslim-majority countries. *MMW* aims to challenge the 'unidimensional representation' of Muslim women 'in the (mainstream) media' (Echchaibi, 2013: 859). It has become a discursive space for women to debate issues such as the veil or the meaning of Muslim feminism. Echchaibi (2013) concluded that,

Muslim women on *MMW* elaborate not only a counter image of themselves as both critical consumers and producers of media messages, but also a rival view of modern identity by calling for the appropriation of their differences and the inclusion of their own social imaginary in a renewed version of the modern experience. (p. 863)

While Echchaibi's article emphasizes the existence and importance of Muslim subjectivity, *MMW* represents an even smaller section of Muslim society than the subjects of Malinovich and Kaufer and Al-Malki's research. The bloggers are either immigrants or Muslims still living outside the United States. Also, their agenda seems to be set entirely by the mainstream media – if only in opposition to their representations.

Three conclusions can be drawn from this review of literature. First, mainstream US media coverage has often stereotyped Muslims as the enemy other and refrained from exploring the diversity within American-Muslim society, helping create the impression of a monolithic Muslim community in popular imagination. Second, while communication scholars have critiqued the objectification and othering of Muslims in the mainstream media, they have paid limited attention to the American-Muslim press. Third, the few studies that do look at American-Muslim media conflate 'Arab/immigrant' with 'Muslim' and thus fail to notice the diversity within the American-Muslim community and the schisms that have been central to its social and political history. Also, except Malinovich, they have focused only on Muslim media coverage of one or two issues deemed significant by the mainstream media rather than explore the

American-Muslim news agenda in and of itself and the place of such issues within that agenda. Those are the concerns this study attempts to deal with.

## Research questions and hypotheses

The theoretical framework developed earlier noted that the news agendas of minority publications reflected their social and political functions. Therefore, this article will first look at the subjects that *IH* and *MJ* focus on, especially the political issues they emphasize in their coverage:

*RQ1A*: What subjects dominate the news agendas of *IH* and *MJ*?

*RQ1B*: Which political issues dominate the news agendas of *IH* and *MJ*?

Providing information about the 'local community' as well as about the 'homeland' is among the key functions of the minority press. But only immigrant American-Muslims have a foreign homeland. Also, given the differences in *IH*'s and *MJ*'s racial affiliations, they may construe their 'local community' differently. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

*H1*: *IH* gives more coverage than *MJ* to foreign issues.

*H2*: *IH* gives more coverage than *MJ* to immigrant Muslims.

*H3*: *MJ* gives more coverage than *IH* to black Muslims.

'Islamophobia' and 'Muslim acts of violence' are two of the most contentious issues related to Muslims in American society, with ideological ramifications. To find out if different segments of the Muslim press have different perspectives on these issues, the following research questions are proposed:

*RQ2*: How do *IH* and *MJ* frame Islamophobia?

*RQ3*: How do *IH* and *MJ* frame Muslim acts of violence?

## Methodology

Content analysis was chosen as the research method for this study. This is a quantitative 'research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use' (Krippendorff, 2003: 18). *IH* and *MJ* were selected because both are well-established news publications with substantial readerships. Importantly for this study, while both profess a 'Muslim/Islamic' sensibility, they have been associated with influential American-Muslim institutions across the racial cleavage within the community.

### Content sample

A total of 16 editions of the weekly *MJ* and 7 editions of the bimonthly *IH* were studied – representing four key moments for American-Muslims from recent history. These events were (1) the 9/11 attacks in 2001, (2) the US invasion of Iraq on 19 March 2003,

(3) President Barack Obama's election on 6 November 2008, and (4) pro-democracy protests in the Middle East that started in January 2011.

Each of these was a major news development, extensively covered by the mainstream press, and each was significant for American-Muslims in its own way. The 9/11 attacks, the biggest terrorist attack in the United States, were carried out by a group of Muslims from the Middle East. Iraq is one of the largest Arab countries, overwhelmingly Muslim in population and historically significant for Muslims worldwide. Obama is not just the first black US President but also the first President with close Muslim connections: his grandfather had converted to Islam, and his father was brought up as a Muslim (Obama, 2004). The pro-democracy protests that started in January 2011 were all in Muslim-dominated countries, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain.

The US invasion of Iraq and President Obama's election were anticipated developments, and so editions before as well as after these events were studied. But as 9/11 and the Arab Spring were unexpected developments, only editions that followed them were studied. For each of the four, the editions closest to the event in each publication were studied. However, that meant some differences in the actual dates of the editions studied because of the substantial difference in *IH*'s and *MJ*'s publication schedule – the former being a bimonthly and the latter a weekly publication.

The *IH* editions studied were November–December 2001 (9/11 attacks), March–April 2003 and May–June 2003 (invasion of Iraq), November–December 2008 and January–February 2009 (President Obama's election), and March–April 2011 and May–June 2011 (Arab spring protests). The *MJ* editions studied were 28 September, 5 October, 12 October, and 19 October 2001 (9/11 attacks); 21 March, 28 March, 4 April, and 11 April 2003 (invasion of Iraq); 7 November, 14 November, 21 November, and 28 November 2008 (President Obama's election); and 4 February, 11 February, 18 February, and 25 February 2011 (Arab Spring protests). As this study aims to find out the general news agendas of these publications rather than their coverage of these particular events, each of these editions was coded in its entirety.

### Coding scheme

There were no previous quantitative analyses of the American-Muslim press, and so this study had to devise its own coding scheme. Coding categories emerged from a preliminary analysis of a 10 percent content sample by the author and a coding assistant, who is a senior journalist with knowledge of Muslim affairs. The unit of analysis was the news story.

To answer RQ1A, stories were coded into the following subject categories: 'politics', 'business and economics', 'social issues', 'education', 'culture and heritage', 'science and health', 'environment', 'community affairs', 'organization-related', 'Islamic faith and practice', and 'other'. To answer RQ1B, political stories were further coded for 'Islamophobia', 'Muslim acts of violence', 'interfaith dialogue', 'relations among Muslims', 'Iraq war', 'Israel-Palestine conflict', 'Kashmir conflict', 'Arab Spring', 'other foreign issues not involving the US', 'general US politics', and 'other'. To test H1, stories were coded into four geographic categories: 'domestic', 'foreign', 'cross-national' (involving the United States and other nations), and 'none' (stories that were not geographically specific). A statistically significant difference in 'foreign' stories was deemed to determine if the hypothesis was supported.

H2 and H3 were tested across three dimensions: racial focus of all stories, racial focus of personality-oriented stories, and racial focus of photographs. To measure the racial focus of all stories, each story was coded for the following categories: 'Muslims in general' (without any racial focus), 'black Muslims', 'immigrant Muslims', 'other Muslims', 'blacks in general', and 'others'. Personality-oriented stories, including features on individuals, interviews, and obituaries, were coded for race/ethnicity ('white', 'black', 'immigrant', and 'others'). Photographs were coded for their racial composition in the following categories: 'only/mostly immigrants', 'immigrants and whites', 'only/mostly blacks', 'blacks and whites', 'immigrants and blacks', 'only/mostly whites', and 'others'. For the sake of consistency, the story remained the unit of analysis even vis-a-vis the photographs. For example, if a story had three photographs, the coding would reflect their combined racial composition, rather than that of each photograph.

To answer RQ2, political stories already coded for Islamophobia were further coded into three dimensions, measuring prevalence (whether Islamophobia is an 'emergent', 'long-standing', 'rare', or 'declining' problem), cause ('cultural difference', 'racism', 'mainstream media portrayals of Muslims', 'influence of anti-Muslim groups', 'government policy', or 'Muslim acts of violence'), and solution ('should non-Muslims change their attitudes', 'should Muslims make an effort to engage with non-Muslims', 'is the onus on both Muslims and non-Muslims to build bridges', or 'should the government formulate tougher laws against Islamophobia'). To answer RQ3, stories coded for Muslim acts of violence were further coded into four dimensions: definition ('terrorism', 'extremism', 'fundamentalism', or 'other'), moral evaluation (degrees of approval or disapproval), cause ('discrimination against Muslims', 'US foreign policy', 'cultural differences', 'misinterpretation of Islam', or 'other'), and solution ('non-Muslims should stop discriminating against Muslims', 'changes in US foreign policy', 'Muslims should interpret Islam as a peaceful faith', 'Muslims should gain more secular education', or 'other').

### *Inter-coder reliability and data analysis*

Inter-coder reliability was measured on a 10 percent content sample. The average agreement for all variables was 97 percent, with agreement on individual variables ranging from 93 to 100 percent. The average inter-coder reliability in terms of *Cohen's kappa* was a healthy .87, ranging from .67 to 1.00 for all variables. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used for analyzing coded data. As publication titles, a nominal level of measurement, was the independent variable in all research questions and hypotheses, the analysis relied on frequency distributions and cross-tabulations.

## **Results**

The coding yielded a sample of 576 stories: 235 from *IH* and 341 from *MJ*. *IH* and *MJ*, respectively, had 35 and 93 stories for the time period corresponding to the 9/11 attacks, 56 and 90 stories for the time period corresponding to the Iraq invasion, 67 and 84 stories for the time period corresponding to President Obama's election, and 77 and 74 stories for the time period corresponding to the Arab Spring protests.

## News agendas

Politics and community affairs dominated the news agendas of *IH* and *MJ*, together accounting for about two-thirds of their respective news agendas (RQ1A). *MJ* published a higher percentage of stories on politics than *IH* (35%–25%). In contrast, *IH*'s coverage of community affairs was proportionally higher than *MJ*'s (34%–25%). These differences were statistically significant ( $N=575$ , *Cramer's V* = .24,  $p < .001$ ). Both publications also carried stories about Islamic faith and practice and organizational matters in reasonably large numbers, while environment and cultural heritage were the least-covered subjects (see Figures 1 and 2).

Within political coverage, nearly a quarter of the stories across the two publications were about interfaith dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims, a fifth were about Islamophobia, another fifth were about US politics, and 13 percent were about Muslim acts of violence (RQ1B). The Iraq war was not a major issue for these publications, accounting for just 6 percent of all political stories. Two other prominent conflicts in Muslim-majority societies, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the Kashmir conflict, garnered just 1 percent each of the total political coverage. In contrast, Arab Spring cornered 7 percent of the political coverage.

Several statistically significant differences also emerged between *IH*'s and *MJ*'s political coverage ( $N=178$ , *Cramer's V* = .44,  $p < .001$ ). Interfaith dialogue made up 36 percent of *IH*'s political coverage, compared with 17 percent for *MJ*. Muslim acts of violence, on the other hand, accounted for just 3 percent of *IH*'s political coverage, compared with 18 percent for *MJ*'s (see Figure 3). Relations among different segments of American-Muslim society was another important issue for *IH*, but *MJ* did not cover this area at all. In contrast, US politics was a major subject for *MJ*, but not so much for *IH*.

## Foreign coverage

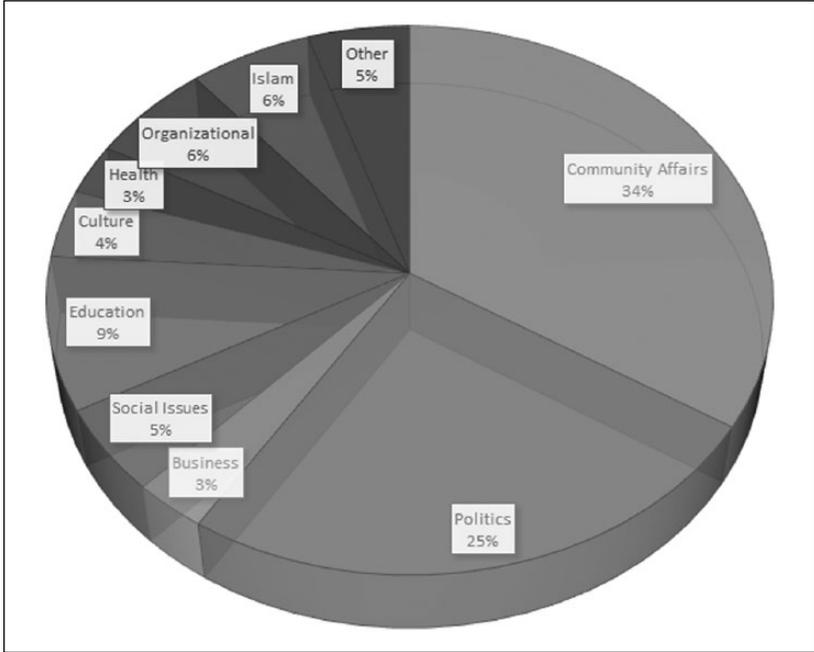
*IH* gave more coverage to foreign stories than *MJ* ( $N=573$ , *Cramer's V* = .14,  $p < .01$ ), supporting H1. But more interestingly, nearly three-fourths of the coverage of each publication was domestic, that is US-centric (see Figure 4).

## Racial divide

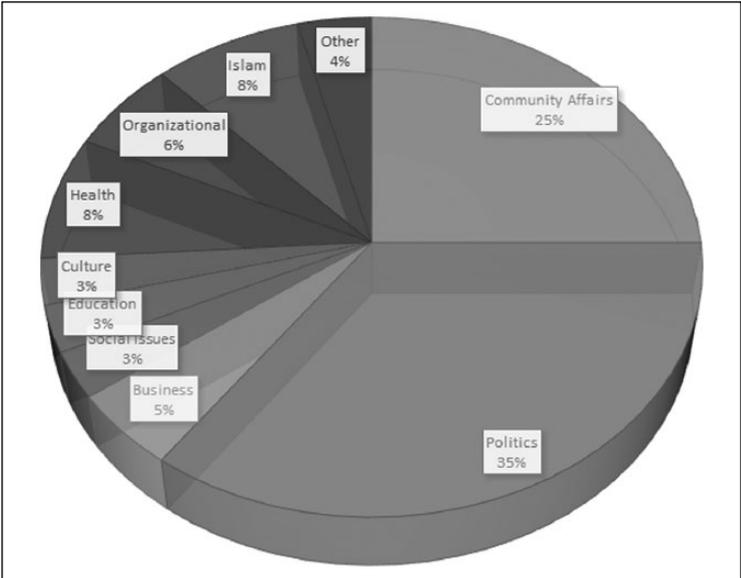
H2 and H3 were tested across three dimensions.

**Racial focus of all stories.** Nearly a quarter of all *IH* stories focused on immigrant Muslims, compared with 7 percent of *MJ* stories. On the other hand, black Muslims were the focus of only 5 percent of *IH* stories, but 40 percent of *MJ* stories focused on black Muslims (see Figure 5). These differences were statistically significant ( $N=568$ , *Cramer's V* = .58,  $p < .001$ ). In terms of racial focus of all stories, both H2 and H3 were supported.

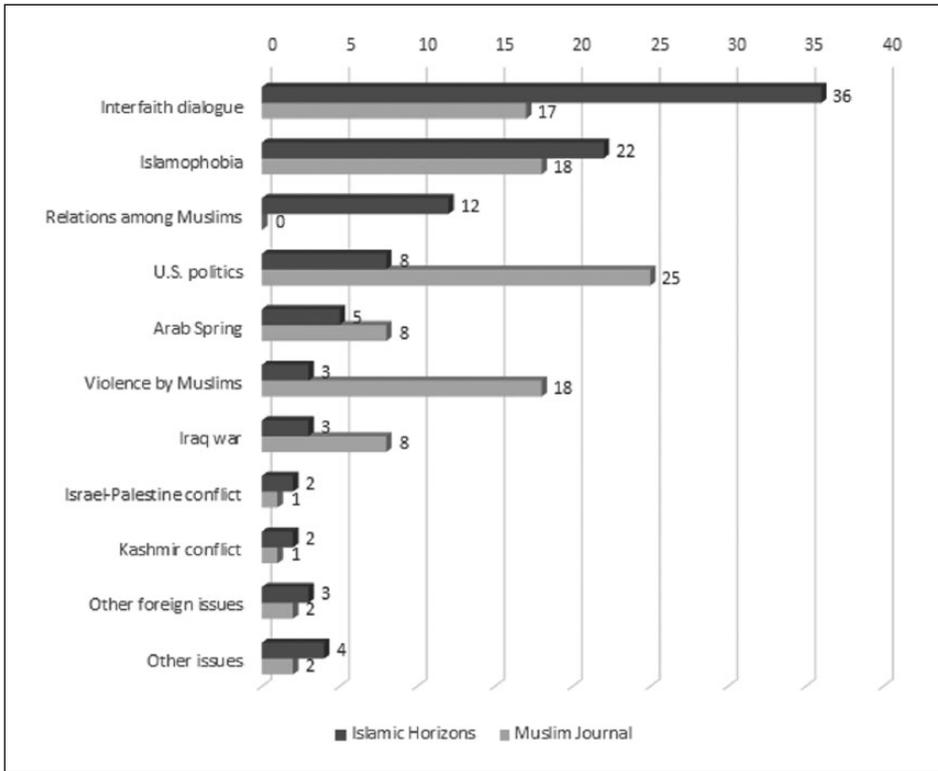
**Racial focus of personality-oriented stories.** Differences in the racial focus of coverage were even starker on this count (see Figure 6). Some 56 percent of such stories in *IH* had an immigrant subject, compared with 5 percent in *MJ*. However, only 39 percent of personality-oriented stories in *IH* had a black subject, while the figure was 91 percent for *MJ*.



**Figure 1.** News agenda of *IH*.  
*IH*: *Islamic Horizons*.



**Figure 2.** News agenda of *MJ*.  
*MJ*: *Muslim Journal*.



**Figure 3.** Political coverage in *IH* and *MJ* (figures in %).

*IH*: Islamic Horizons; *MJ*: Muslim Journal.

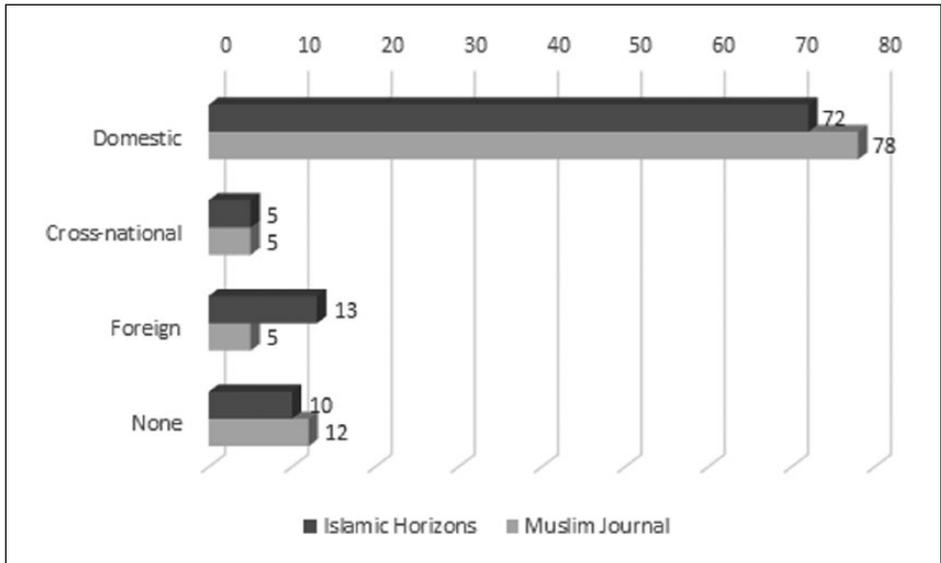
These differences were statistically significant ( $N=39$ , *Cramer's V* = .57,  $p < .01$ ). In terms of racial focus of personality-oriented stories too, both H2 and H3 were supported.

**Racial focus of photographs.** In more than half the *IH* stories with photographs, the photographs showed only or mostly immigrants, compared with 9 percent in *MJ* (see Figure 7). Conversely, in 80 percent of *MJ* stories with photographs, the photographs showed only or mostly blacks. In *IH*, this figure was 15 percent. The differences were statistically significant ( $N=301$ , *Cramer's V* = .70,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, both H2 and H3 were supported on this dimension as well.

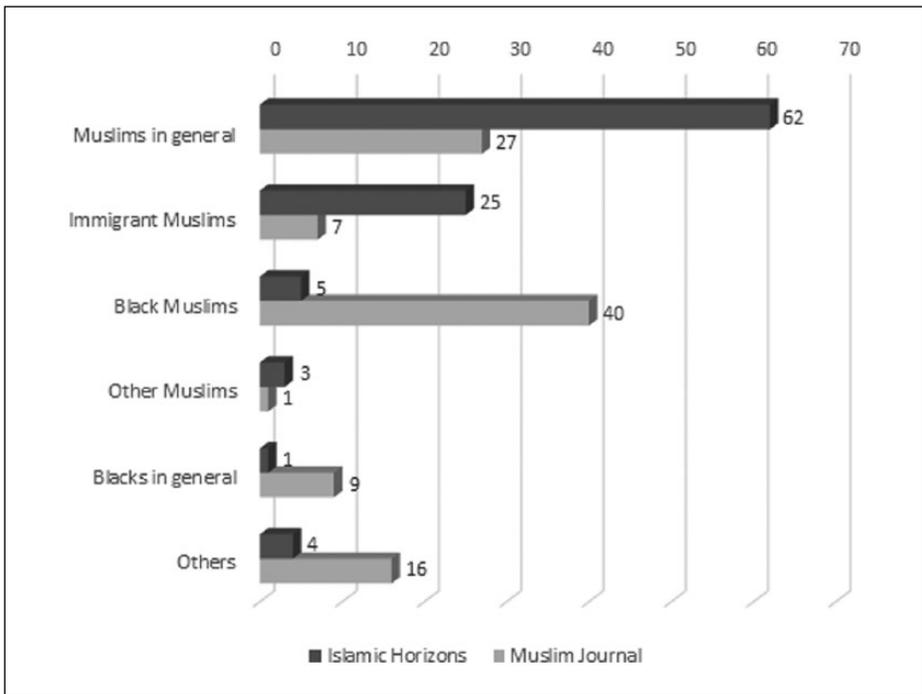
### Framing of 'Islamophobia'

Coverage of Islamophobia constituted 6 percent of *IH*'s overall coverage and 7 percent in *MJ*. Its framing (RQ2) was measured across three dimensions.

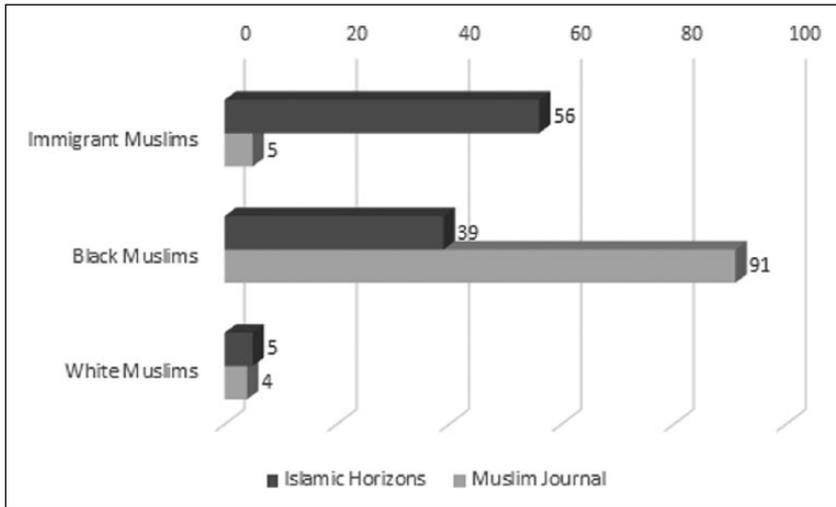
**Prevalence.** Two-thirds of the stories focusing on Islamophobia across the two publications portrayed it as an emerging problem, while a quarter portrayed it as a long-standing problem. No story in either publication portrayed it as rare or declining. Differences between *IH* and *MJ* were not significant.



**Figure 4.** Geographical focus of all stories in *IH* and *MJ* (figures in %).  
*IH*: Islamic Horizons; *MJ*: Muslim Journal.



**Figure 5.** Racial focus of all stories in *IH* and *MJ* (figures in %).  
*IH*: Islamic Horizons; *MJ*: Muslim Journal.



**Figure 6.** Racial focus of personality-oriented stories in *IH* and *MJ* (figures in %).  
*IH*: Islamic Horizons; *MJ*: Muslim Journal.

**Cause.** Some 40 percent of Islamophobia stories across the two publications blamed Muslim acts of violence as the cause of Islamophobia, 23 percent mentioned no cause, and 17 percent called it the result of government policies, particularly at the time of Iraq war. In *IH*, 38 percent of the stories did not mention any cause, while 23 percent blamed violence by Muslims, and an equal percentage blamed the influence of anti-Muslim lobbies for it. In contrast, half the Islamophobia-focused stories in *MJ* blamed violence by Muslims as its cause, 27 percent blamed government policies, and 14 percent gave no cause. These differences were statistically significant ( $N=35$ , *Cramer's V* = .62,  $p < .05$ ).

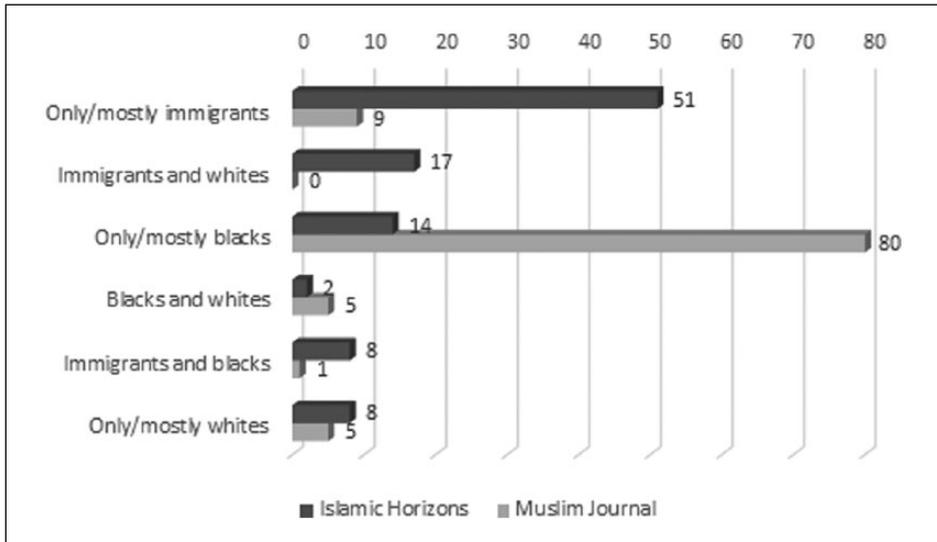
**Solution.** Nearly a third of all Islamophobia stories in the two publications did not mention any solution. A quarter put the onus on non-Muslims to change their attitudes, a fifth said Muslims should take the initiative to improve relations with non-Muslims, and 17 percent suggested that the responsibility for building bridges lied on both sides. Differences between *IH* and *MJ* were not statistically significant.

### Framing of 'Muslim acts of violence'

Coverage of Muslim acts of violence amounted to just 4 percent of the total sample (6% in *MJ*, 1% in *IH*). As there were too few stories to merit statistical analysis ( $N=23$ ), the results are presented descriptively.

**Problem definition.** *MJ* regularly referred to Muslim acts of violence as 'terrorism'. *IH* refrained from giving it any name at all, while referring to 9/11 as a 'tragedy'. In fact, its only coverage of violence committed by Muslims was in the edition following 9/11.

**Moral evaluation.** Both publications adopted a disapproving tone toward Muslim acts of violence. But while *IH* stories were 'somewhat disapproving', almost all *MJ* articles



**Figure 7.** Racial focus of photographs in *IH* and *MJ* (figures in %).

*IH*: Islamic Horizons; *MJ*: Muslim Journal.

were ‘strongly disapproving’ – expressly condemning such acts. Much of *MJ*’s coverage of 9/11 consisted of reporting various Muslim nations’ and organizations’ strong condemnation of the attack. The word ‘condemn’ was often used in the headlines.

**Cause.** *IH* stories did not mention any cause for violence by Muslims. Most *MJ* stories also gave no cause, while some framed such acts as the ‘misinterpretation of Islam’.

**Solution.** None of the *IH* stories talked about solutions. Most *MJ* stories also did not do so, but some said that interpreting Islam as a ‘peaceful faith’ was the best answer.

## Discussion

What do these news agendas and frames reveal about *IH*’s and *MJ*’s social functions? As noted earlier, Viswanath and Arora (2000) identified five functions of the minority press: informational, cultural transmission, community booster, sentinel, and assimilatory. *IH* and *MJ* clearly perform the basic *informational* function, giving substantial coverage to the affairs of the local American-Muslim community. *IH* also carried more foreign news than *MJ*, reflecting its immigrant ‘bias’.

*Cultural transmission*, however, does not seem to be very high on their respective agendas. While there was some coverage of Islamic faith and practice in both publications, subjects such as art, architecture, literature, and music were largely ignored. Two interrelated reasons may account for this finding. One, this may reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds of American-Muslims. As Muslims in the United States come from around the world, reviving and sustaining a particular culture may not be as significant a function for the American-Muslim press as it is for the media of other minorities. Two, *IH* and *MJ*, being English-language

publications, perhaps aim to reach a broad base of American-Muslims. Vernacular American-Muslim publications might still be performing this function.

The *community booster* function is very important for both *IH* and *MJ*. Success stories of community members, evident in personality-oriented features such as interview, profiles, and obituaries, formed a large part of their substantial community affairs coverage. Limited coverage of conflict – be it the Iraq war, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the Kashmir conflict, or Muslim acts of violence – suggests the same. This is particularly interesting as the broad period of study corresponds with large-scale conflicts involving Muslims and the United States. The only ‘conflict’ *IH* and *MJ* did report on is Islamophobia – and in doing so, they performed the *sentinel* function. However, even stories on Islamophobia were not particularly high in number, comprising only a fifth of their total political coverage.

Instead, it is the *assimilatory* function that appears to be the highest on the agendas of both publications, but especially for *IH*. This is evident in a number of ways. Nearly three-fourths of the stories in each publication were US-centric. Moreover, a good percentage of political stories was devoted to interfaith dialogue – 36 percent for *IH* and 17 percent for *MJ*. *IH* also carried stories on relations among different segments of the American-Muslim community, while *MJ* had a lot of stories on US politics. The framing of both Islamophobia and Muslim acts of violence also reflected this function. Rather than suggest any inherent ‘anti-Islamic’ bigotry in American society, *IH* and *MJ* often blamed violence by Muslims themselves for Islamophobia. Both disapproved of Muslim acts of violence and called for building bridges between Muslims and the ‘mainstream’ American society.

The analysis also reveals that the schism between immigrants and black American-Muslims influences the community’s media in significant ways. *IH* gave a lot more coverage to immigrant American-Muslims, while *MJ* focused overwhelmingly on black American-Muslims. *MJ* forthrightly condemned Muslim acts of violence, which have often involved immigrant Muslims, and forthrightly called such acts ‘terrorism’. *IH*, on the other hand, was coy in its treatment of the subject, refusing to even give it a name. This finding is theoretically significant. Extant research on minority media focuses on how they offer an ‘alternative’ to the mainstream – but in doing so, such scholarship assumes homogeneity *within* minority communities and their media. In contrast, the findings presented here show that social cleavages within minority communities significantly impact the agendas and frames of their news media.

The findings also reveal how minority media can serve as a means of social control. Both *IH* and *MJ* carried a good number of stories about the organizations they are run by, their activities, events, and leadership. These organizations and their leaders constitute the political elite within the American-Muslim community. Raising their profile amounts to normalizing and reinforcing the community’s power structures and political hierarchies. High coverage of routine events and success stories serves the same normative function – giving the impression that the community is doing well under its existing leadership and there is no need for change.

This finding, too, has theoretical ramifications. Minority media play a more complex social role than their conceptualization in the literature as simply ‘radical’ or ‘oppositional’ would suggest. Those conceptions constitute an *outside* view of the minority media, focusing on their functions in relation to the mainstream media and society. But this study has presented an *inside* view of minority media, drawing attention to their functions vis-à-vis the minority community. From this perspective, the minority media can reflect the social structures as well as reinforce the power hierarchies within minority societies.

## Conclusion

This study set out to unveil the American-Muslim press as a window to the American-Muslim imaginary. The findings and their theoretical analysis lead us to three broad conclusions. First, the American-Muslim press is more concerned with the local Muslim community and its assimilation into the broader American society than with the so-called 'Muslim world'. These results challenge the portrayal of Muslims in the mainstream media, which takes its cue from sections of the mainstream political leadership to project Muslims as the 'other' or, worse, as a fifth column within American society.

Second, racial differences and their impact on the coverage of different publications reveal the diversity within the American-Muslim community – and the subjectivity that such diversity necessarily entails. Treating Muslims as a homogeneous monolith has been central to their stereotyping and 'othering', but that homogeneity is illusory. Multiple American-Muslim voices and opinions exist, waiting to be heard.

Third, minority media reflect and reinforce the social structures and political hierarchies within the minority community, thus serving as a means of social control. Viswanath and Arora (2000) noted that these schisms would appear and grow with the size of the minority population. As various immigrant communities increase in size and minority media broaden their reach across the United States, these functions of the minority media will become even more significant, both socially and politically.

This study has thus shed light on the news agendas, frames, and functions of the American-Muslim press while simultaneously extending the theoretical understanding of minority media. However, it has several limitations of its own. Future research should look at vernacular newspapers and magazines as well as women and youth publications to advance the knowledge of American-Muslim media, particularly with regard to their cultural transmission function. Researchers may also compare the agenda-setting (McCombs, 2005) role of the American-Muslim press and the mainstream press within the American-Muslim community. Finally, the author hopes that research on minority media, in general, would become more sensitive to their social control function and to the diversity within minority societies.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. While most Nation of Islam members followed their leader, W.D. Mohammed, into Sunni Islam, Nation of Islam was revived by Louis Farrakhan in 1978 (Smith, 1999) and continues to operate as a black Muslim organization.
2. Louis Farrakhan-led Nation of Islam launched its own publication, *The Final Call*, in 1979, which also draws on the legacy of *Muhammad Speaks* (Smith, 1999).
3. 'Critical' and 'functionalist' perspectives are usually at odds with each other. Critical theorists, who challenge the status quo, view functionalism as a validation of the status quo (see

Gitlin, 1978). Viswanath and Arora's paper is also significant for postulating a functionalist framework to study the media with a critical axiology.

4. Various studies on the coverage of Muslims in mainstream European media, however, report similar stereotyping (see Poole and Richardson, 2006).

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