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in Twenty-First Century
U.S. Media

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Media Representations of “Islamic Punk” through a Postcolonial Lens

Saif Shahin

Mary’s only famous for being a virgin,
Our Ayesha was humping like Rastas are toke’n
Jesus ignored whores; maybe boys were his hos then?
Muhammad would’ve kept Mary Magdalen Moaning.

These are lines from a song released as part of the 2008 album *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay* by The Kominas, a Boston-based band. They are obviously meant to be provocative, but whom do they intend to provoke? Is it Muslims, by portraying Prophet Muhammad and his wife Ayesha engaging in debauch acts? Or is it Christians, with sexualized references to Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and Mary Magdalene? Or is it both at once—culminating as the lines do depicting a salaciously styled coitus between sacred figures from both religions, extending the metaphor insinuated in the title of the song: “Suicide Bomb the Gap?”

The Kominas are part of an “Islamic punk” subculture that began sprouting a little over a decade ago, spreading from San Antonio to Boston, then farther north into Canada and, eventually, all the way to the United Kingdom. It has come to be known as taqwacore, derived from the Arabic word *taqwa* (consciousness of God) and the suffix *core* that is common to many “angry” punk genres (Knight, 2011). The term was first used in *The Taqwacores*, a novel written in 2003 by Michael Muhammad Knight, a White American convert to Islam. Knight created a fictitious world of young Muslim punks leading part-hallowed and part-hedonistic lives in New York, struggling to find a common ground between their Islamic and American identities in the years following the 9/11 attacks (Knight, 2004). Young American Muslims who came across the novel closely identified with Knight’s characters and began to put the songs in the novel to music. Taqwacore was born (Andersen, Lingner, Ernst, Tadini, & Coelli, 2010; Hosman, 2009).

Soon, the idea of Islamic punk not only fired up the young Muslim imagination but also evoked the interest of national and international media—especially when some of these groups launched a “taqwa tour,” enacting a passage from Knight’s novel. It culminated in taqwacore artists attending, “disrupting,” and being kicked out of an Islamic convention in Chicago in 2007 (Crafts, 2007; Knight, 2011). Several news organizations reported the event

This chapter examines the news coverage of taqwacore in mainstream United States and United Kingdom, publications as well as ethnic newspapers and magazines in both nations. Because of their amorphous character and ambivalent identities, taqwacores defy easy representation. Yet, news coverage must necessarily give them some shape and form, some roots and some purpose. As Durham notes, “[J]ournalists are as much subject to the multiplicity of ideological meanings in their work as they are charged with rendering some order from them” (1998, p. 113). But the journalistic act of rendering order is a social and political act, and mirrors the stock of cultural assumptions and understandings upon which it is based. Examining it takes one through the looking glass into the socially constructed reality of narratives and ideologies that underpin thought and action (Berkowitz, 2010; Reese, 2001). The form that taqwacore is given in news coverage thus reflects the news media’s worldview, their perception of not just Islamic punk subculture but also of “Muslims” as a racial category, and of the relationship between “Islam” and “the West.”

The objective of this chapter, in line with the general purpose of this volume, is to broaden our knowledge of the U.S. media and their interactions with racial minorities, in this case, Muslims. Recent scholarship has problematized the understanding of *race* as a static notion and focused on *racialization*, “a concept [that] reflects the changing meanings of race within different political, social, and economic contexts producing a more expansive and complex discussion of race” (Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 648). Such accounts take the discourse of race beyond skin pigmentation to look at how various other identity markers, including religion, language, and geography, can become racialized (e.g., Barth, 1969). In this vein, Kumar (2012) and Rana (2011) chart “the parallel development of Islamophobic discourses alongside other forms of racial bigotry and discrimination” and show that “Islamophobia is in fact a form of racism” (Love, 2013, p. 70; see also Stein & Salime, 2015). Taking a comparative approach and juxtaposing taqwacore coverage in the U.S., U.K., and “ethnic” news media helps place the narratives and ideologies at work in their proper historical and political context, revealing where they themselves spring from and what purposes they serve. Specifically, this study locates the coverage of Muslims in the U.S. media as a racialized “other” in White supremacist/savior narratives that have historically driven European/Western colonization projects and continue to provide ideological succor to neocolonialism. In doing so, it also lays bare the role of news media in reflecting and reproducing such narratives, thereby legitimizing the political actions they spur (Kumar, 2012).

Framing Islam

News, far from being an objective representation of the world we live in, represents journalists’ and news organizations’ interpretations of the world,

(and what not to cover), as well as *how* to cover them. But these interpretations are not idiosyncratic (Zelizer, 1993). They are shaped by commonly shared cultural narratives and social and political ideologies (Tuchman, 1978; Zelizer, 1990). Journalism, as a social practice and an instrument of social control, coheres within these narratives and ideologies—and the structures of power they represent (Berkowitz, 2010; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

For at least three decades, news framing has been the theoretical umbrella under which a lot of research along these lines has been conducted. Reese defines frames as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (2001, p. 11). As this definition stresses, frames pan out through space and time: they are widely shared over long periods. Indeed, it is this shared, enduring characteristic of frames that makes them potent meaning-making devices. They constitute the fabric of knowledge in a society, of what is deemed good or bad, right or wrong by its members and its institutions, including journalists and news organizations—indeed, what is considered worth knowing itself (Durham, 1998). The act of news framing—“to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (Entman, 1993, p. 52)—thus need not be intentional or instrumentalist. It is the fallout of collectively held and deep-seated beliefs about “who we are, what we stand for, what our values are, and what our relationships are with other groups” (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 69).

A number of scholars have looked at the framing of Islam and Muslims in Western, especially mainstream U.S., media (Chuang & Roemer, 2013; Kumar, 2010; Powell, 2011; Reese & Lewis, 2009). Kumar identifies five frames that are commonly used in Western media portrayals of the religion and its followers post-9/11: “Islam is a monolithic religion, Islam is a uniquely sexist religion, the ‘Muslim mind’ is incapable of rationality and science, Islam is inherently violent, [and] the West spreads democracy, while Islam spawns terrorism” (2010, p. 254). Framing Islam as monolithic is a central frame as “it is only by denying the diversity of Islamic practices that one can argue that ‘Islam’ has certain inherent, unchanging characteristics that render it antidemocratic, violent, backward-looking, and so on” (p. 260). The remaining four frames serve the purpose of “othering” Muslims by ascribing them characteristics—such as oppression of women, irrationality, extremism and terrorism—that are different from or even the opposite of certain qualities presumed to be inherent to the West. In sum, these frames construct the Muslim as an enemy, to be reviled, feared, and fought—and thus create the justification for the colonization of Muslim lands and peoples (see also Kumar, 2012).

From Orientalism to “Good” and “Bad” Muslims

Critical studies on the framing of Muslims in Western media explicitly or implicitly draw on *Orientalism*, or “a style of thought based upon the

ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and ... ‘the Occident,’ in which the West is constructed in opposition, and superior, to the Orient” (Said, 1978, p. 2). In this worldview, people of the Orient are often represented as backward and premodern; violent and oppressive of their own people (especially women); irrational; and lacking in democracy, human rights, and scientific development. When they are pitted against a “modern” West, enlightened and rational, technologically advanced, and willing to share its bounties with the “natives,” colonization itself becomes a moral act—something the West does for the good of the Orient. This worldview is reflected in what Said (1978) called the *postcolonial gaze*—the colonizer’s scrutiny of its colonized subject in a manner that simultaneously objectifies the colonized and identifies it as inferior, thereby elevating the status of the colonizer and justifying the colonizer–colonized power hierarchy as natural and necessary.

Said himself put U.S. media reporting of the “Islamic world” under the scrutiny of Orientalism and argued that:

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. (1981, p. 26)

Mamdani (2004) examined how Muslims are regarded under the postcolonial gaze after the 9/11 attacks and noted the emergence of a binary black-and-white perspective. Muslims who explicitly criticized the attacks and championed the U.S.’s decision to wage war to root out “Islamic terrorism” were viewed as “good Muslims,” while those who questioned the violent response and pointed out that U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia and the Middle East may ultimately be responsible for the attacks were labeled “bad Muslims.” The goodness and badness of Muslims had nothing to do with either the Islamic faith or Western “enlightenment” principles. Instead, it depended on their political position vis-à-vis the U.S. and its “war on terror.” This was an extension of the with-us-or-against-us mentality that took over the country after the attacks, and yet had its roots in the age-old Orientalist discourse.

Taqwacore: A Brief History

Taqwacore, a subculture populated mostly by second- or third-generation immigrant Muslim youth who have been born or brought up in the West but feel a deep emotional bond with the societies their families hail from, complicates such a good–bad binary. It came into being in the years following the 9/11 attacks, a difficult time when the world appeared divided between radicalized Islamism and bloodthirsty neoconservatism. There was

no middle ground, no meeting point—until some young American-Muslims began to create it (O'Brien, 2013).

Michael Muhammad Knight was born into a Catholic family in New York and converted to Islam as a teenager. He moved to Pakistan to study Islam, but soon “burned out on the demands of organized religion” and returned to the U.S. (Andersen et al., 2010). He discovered punk music through some friends and found a symphony between his spiritual and musical creeds.

They (Islam and punk) aren't so far removed as you'd think. Both began in tremendous bursts of truth and vitality but seem to have lost something along the way—the energy, perhaps, that comes with knowing the world has never seen such positive force and fury and never would again. Both have suffered from sell-outs and hypocrites, but also from true believers whose devotion had crippled their creative drive. Both are viewed by outsiders as unified, cohesive communities when nothing can be further from the truth.

(Knight, 2007)

Knight turned his ideas into a fictional account on the lives of a group of youngsters in Buffalo, New York, who weave together Islamic and punk lifestyle values and philosophies—often by defying both of them (Knight, 2004; see also McDowell, 2014). *The Taqwacores* was finished in 2003 and initially Xeroxed and hand-distributed by Knight before finding a publisher a year later (Hosman, 2009). True to the punk creed of effrontery, the novel deliberately confronts norms, such as when a character reads the Quran while smoking pot, or a riot grrrl plays the guitar in a burqa and leads mixed-sex prayers. All through the novel, the characters have to deal with difficult issues such as gender politics, drugs, and homosexuality—issues that both Islam and American punk cultures are grappling with today—as they try to make sense of who they are and how, or how not, to define themselves (Andersen et al., 2010; McDowell, 2014; O'Brien, 2013).

Soon, it was not just Knight and his characters who were putting Islam and punk together. Shahjehan Khan, a young Boston musician of Pakistani origin, had an epiphany of sorts when he read *The Taqwacores*. “I had a lot of guilt growing up about not doing the right thing or not being a good Muslim or a good Pakistani kid. And it was reading the book that was kind of an assurance that this confusion and maybe disenchantment was normal, and that other people went through it and there was nothing wrong with it,” Khan said in an interview (Crafts, 2009). But that wasn't Khan's only problem. “On 9/12, the day after 9/11, I was a senior in high school and I was walking to a class or something like that and some random kid was like, ‘Yo, what did your people do?’ he said. And I didn't really know how to respond to that” (Crafts, 2009).

After hearing one of the poems from the novel, “Muhammad Was a Punk Rocker,” set to music by an Iranian teenager from Texas (Crafts,

2007), Khan decided to team up with his friend Basim Usmani and form a punk rock band. Knight's fiction turned into fact and The Kominas were born. Gradually, similar bands started forming across the U.S. Five of them—The Kominas, Secret Trial Five, Al-Thawra, Vote Hezbollah, and Omar Waqar—came together for a “Taqwa tour” in 2007, bringing an event in the novel to life (Knight, 2011). This event led to a documentary of the tour being released that year. A feature film based on the novel was made in 2010.

Methods

This study is based on a comparative frame analysis of the coverage of taqwacore in mainstream U.S. and U.K. media, as well as “ethnic” media in the two countries. A search on the LexisNexis database for the term “taqwacore” yielded six articles from mainstream U.S. publications (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The International Herald Tribune*) and 10 articles from U.K. publications (*The Guardian* and *The Times*). A search for the same term in the Ethnic NewsWatch database yielded eight articles from *Hyphen Magazine*, *India Currents*, *International Examiner*, *Arab American News*, *News India Times* (all U.S.-based), and *Eastern Eye* (U.K.-based). The frame analysis focuses on three issues: (1) the representation of taqwacore, (2) the representation of Muslims, and (3) the representation of the Islam–West relationship in media coverage. While the corpus is small in size, the sharpness of the similarities and differences found between the U.S., U.K., and ethnic media samples lends validity to the findings—as does their interpretation within the broader canon of critical and postcolonial literature. Like all cultural analysis, however, this effort is “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5).

Framing Taqwacore

United States Media

The U.S. media attribute two main characteristics to taqwacore. The first is its representation as intentionally provocative. Both Knight and the taqwacore artists he inspired are supposed to intentionally shock Muslims out of their traditional/conventional thinking and way of life. An article in *The New York Times* noted that “[Knight] often satirizes his fellow Muslims, pricking the traditionalists. He is a court jester to the Islamic world, a provocateur in a kufi” (Oppenheimer, 2011). *The Washington Post* published an article by Knight himself, in which he, while referring to a couple of songs by The Kominas, said: “Unfortunately, neither song title can be printed in a family newspaper—which gives you a sense of the liberties that some taqwacore groups take with social convention” (Knight, 2014).

Related to this framing, taqwacore is also portrayed as a revolutionary movement—a brave rebellion by second- and third-generation immigrants against the first. As stated in another article in *The Washington Post*:

Deep in the woods of this colonial town boils a kind of revolutionary movement. From the basement of this middle-class home tucked in the woods west of Boston, the Kominas have helped launched a small but growing South Asian and Middle Eastern punk rock movement that is attracting children of Muslim and Hindu immigrants.

(Contreras, 2010)

United Kingdom Media

In the British media, taqwacore artists were initially portrayed as rebels against traditional/conventional Islam. An article in *The Times* suggested, “Rebellion is certainly key to the Kominas and their angry, funny, iconoclastic music reflects the complexities and contradictions of growing up both Muslim and American” (Dalton, 2010). The same trope was also present in *The Guardian*. Describing taqwacore artist and playwright Sabina England, the newspaper said,

There can't be that many female playwrights who are deaf, punk and Muslim, so Sabina England is something of a find. With a lurid Mohawk and leather jacket slathered with slogans, she looks every inch the rebel and has an attitude to match.

(Butt, 2007)

Some later coverage implied that the idea behind taqwacore as a subculture was inauthentic, even unreal. Another *Guardian* article, for instance, reported,

“There never really was a scene,” says Imran Malik, of the Kominas, a so-called Taqwacore band from New Jersey ... “A few bands came together for that documentary, but the film crew was paying for it, so it was fabricated and forced by someone who was trying to sell a narrative, a sexy narrative. Since then, a lot of those bands have either ceased to exist, or said they're not Taqwacore after all.”

(Bhattacharya, 2011)

The article went on to note that, “Similarly, the characters of The Taqwacores movie seem confused. Their revolution is compromised ... a rebel who doesn't know what to rebel against begins to veer into the realm of comedy” (Bhattacharya, 2011). In British coverage, thus, taqwacore became a caricature of itself.

Ethnic Media

Ethnic media differed sharply from mainstream American and British media representations of taqwacore. First, they decried mainstream media's portrayal of taqwacore artists as young rebels trying to shock the traditionalist Muslim community. This, the reports suggested, took the attention away from music. A *News India Times* article noted,

“No one actually gave us an album review; it was always, ‘Oh, look at this, it's shocking,’” [Shahjehan] Khan said. “It's cool something I created is getting attention, and then you sit back and think, ‘Well, is the attention getting out the message that I want?’”

(Abdulrahim, 2009)

The report quoted taqwacore artist Omar Waqar as saying, “It's been less about the music than about who we are and how we're dressed” (Abdulrahim, 2009). On similar lines, *India Currents* observed, “The Taqwacores [film] looks not to alienate, but to provide a space for Muslim youth that has not been provided before” (Maiwandi, 2011).

Second, ethnic media framed taqwacore as not inauthentic but against the very notion of authenticity—refusing to fit under any label or category, including the “taqwacore” label. An *Arab American News* report noted,

[The filmmakers] deal with anti-Muslim racism on the one hand—the deep stares from passing motorists and a Detroit show at Small's canceled because of ‘the Muslim thing.’ On the other hand, they deal with intolerance from conservative Muslims, culminating at the Islamic Society of North America conference, which ends in a ruckus as cops tell one of the bands to either leave or be arrested.

(Moossavi, 2009)

India Currents took the issue head-on, asking taqwacore bands what the term means to them. The reporter wrote: “I got some friendly and informative responses, but other bands' reactions varied from suspicious to overtly hostile ... I was trying to make Taqwacore represent a new Muslim ideology. Taqwacore is more interested in questioning all ideology than creating a new one” (Rockwell, 2009b). Ethnic media, in its coverage of taqwacore, thus attempted to give artists more agency in defining who they are, or aren't, rather than impose a “rebel” narrative or pass judgment upon them as inauthentic or unreal.

Framing Muslims

United States Media

The U.S. media's taqwacore coverage split the Muslim community into “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims.” In this framing, good Muslims would

typically be young, born and/or brought up in the U.S. and, most important, culturally Americanized. The bad ones, on the other hand, are traditional, orthodox, first-generation Muslims who remain un-American in their ways and beliefs. Punkness, as an American tradition, becomes a symbol and a measure of how good a Muslim is in this narrative.

For instance, *The Washington Post* noted that taqwacore “is drawing scorn from some traditional Muslims who say their political, hard-edged music is ‘haraam,’ or forbidden” (Contreras, 2010). Referring to The Kominas’s visit to the 2007 Islamic convention, the article said:

The musicians performed at several venues but were kicked off stage during an open-mike performance at the Islamic Society of North America convention in Chicago. Traditional Muslims at the convention decried the electric guitar-based music as un-Islamic, and others were upset that a woman dared sing on stage.

(Contreras, 2010)

In a similar vein, *The New York Times* constructed Knight as a good Muslim who was challenging the orthodoxy of bad Muslims—not just in the U.S. but around the world.

Mr. Knight has written seven books since 2002, including a memoir in which he describes his disillusionment with orthodox Islam ... His writings have perturbed many Muslims, as have his attacks on hypocrisy and fractiousness in the Muslim world.

(Oppenheimer, 2011)

United Kingdom Media

Like the American media, the British media also relied on the binary good Muslim–bad Muslim trope in its coverage. *The Guardian* quoted taqwacore artist and playwright Sabina England as saying,

A lot of Muslim kids are tired of being told what to do, how to think, what to believe in, and how to act, by their parents. There are “the angry Muslim kids” who wanna grow beards and pray five times a day, and then there are the OTHER “angry Muslim kids” who wanna get drunk and say a huge big “fuck you” to the Muslim population.

(Butt, 2007)

Oppressing women is deemed a common characteristic of the ordinary bad Muslims—which taqwacore artists were rebelling against. Referring to Sena Hussain, a Canadian member of the all-girl taqwacore group Secret Trial Five, the report said:

[I]n a male-dominated culture, she thinks they will face challenges

women are seen as helpless and oppressed. We want to prove that wrong. I used to sport a mohawk, I don’t now, but we will totally play up the punk thing.”

(Butt, 2007)

While good Muslims, such as the taqwacore artists, are supposedly pro-West, bad Muslims are linked directly with terrorism as well as oppressive culture. *The Times*, for instance, quoted The Kominas’ Basim Usmani as saying: “Everyone always asks about our struggle after 9/11, but we didn’t feel that great about our culture before 2001, you know?” (Dalton, 2010).

Ethnic Media

In contrast with mainstream U.S. and British media, ethnic media outlets presented the Muslim community as a broad church within which differences in attitude and opinion were quite normal. Referring to the characters created by Knight, an *India Currents* article said,

At one extreme is Umar, who embraces both puritanical “straight-edge” punk and orthodox Salafi Islam, but is condemned by the latter because of his many tattoos and his tendency to burst into obscenities when his housemates smoke dope in his pick-up truck. At the other extreme is Jehangir, who repeatedly declares that “Islam can take any shape you want it to” ... There is Rabeya, whose face no one has ever seen because she always wears a burqa. She also sings Iggy Pop songs, reads Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir, and blacks out passages she cannot accept in her copy of the Koran. In the middle of all of this is Yusuf, abstaining from drugs and alcohol, who is studying engineering because his parents told him to.

(Rockwell, 2009a)

Taqwacore artists are not necessarily “pro-West”—at least in any political sense—in this frame. Another *India Currents* article reported that despite being gay herself, the Secret Trial Five member Sena Hussain, “criticized [gay “Islamic reformer” Irshad] Manji for her support of ‘apartheid states like Israel.’” It observed that “[r]eal-life Muslims, unlike their media caricatures, often agree to disagree, and tolerate their differences even when their disagreement is strong and passionate” (Rockwell, 2009b).

News India Times also problematized the “good Muslim/bad Muslim” narrative. For instance, The Kominas’ vocalist Nyle Usmani was quoted in an article as saying, “I’d like to thank 9/11. I wouldn’t be here without you” (Abdulrahim, 2009). While good Muslims are supposed to ...

finding something positive in it—indeed, calling it his *raison d'être*. Bandmate Shahjehan Khan agreed with Usmani, saying, “Yeah, basically we wouldn’t be here without [9/11].” The article later clarified that taqwacore groups’ “satirical and brash lyrics and song titles criticize both fundamentalist Islam and post-September 11 ethnic and religious profiling” (Abdulrahim, 2009).

Framing the Islam–West Relationship

United States Media

Two frames dominated the representation of how the “Islamic world” and the “West” relate to each other in the U.S. media. One was a “White savior” frame, reflected, first, in the overwhelming focus on Michael Muhammad Knight in the taqwacore coverage and, second, in his portrayal as a catalysis of modernization and reform in “backward/premodern” Muslim society. *International Herald Tribune*, for instance, suggested,

If Islamic radicals—the “fundys” in Mr. Knight’s terminology—yearn to rescue what they see as authentic seventh-century Islam from the accumulated corruptions of the centuries, especially the corruptions of Western contact, Mr. Knight wants to do the inverse: save Islam by shedding antiquated and retrograde seventh-century ideas (about women and gays, for example) and making it consistent with the personal and sensual liberations of the 21st century.

(Bernstein, 2010)

The second, closely related frame was that of American triumphalism. Taqwacore’s ethos were deemed American ethos. As stated in *The Washington Post*, “The (taqwacore) bands are doing what American kids have done for generations: forming bands and making loud music” (Contreras, 2010). Knight, the White savior, was himself deemed an embodiment of American values that would liberate Islam.

Knight is deeply American himself, which, for those concerned about a clash of civilizations between the Muslim world and the Judeo-Christian West, raises the question whether he could represent an amalgamation of cultures, a sort of Americanization and liberalization of Islam from within.

(Bernstein, 2010)

The *International Herald Tribune* article concluded by quoting Knight himself as saying: “I very much believe ... that America ... on some level America can save Islam” (Bernstein, 2010).

United Kingdom Media

While the British media did not, for obvious reasons, project any American triumphalism, the White savior frame was apparent in their coverage as well—with the focus on Knight and his depiction as the man behind the movement. *The Guardian* wrote in 2007,

Knight, who is 29 and lives in New York with his dog Sunny—“not as in Sunni Muslim”—downplays his achievement of single-handedly inspiring this subculture that has produced artists such as the Kominas, Secret Trial Five, Vote Hezbollah, Al-Thawra, 8-Bit and Diacritical.

(Butt, 2007)

Four years later, the same trope was still prevalent in the newspaper.

The Taqwacores [novel] spawned real-life Muslim punk bands. Bands such as The Kominas from Boston, the all-girl Secret Trial Five from Toronto, Al Thawra (The Power) from Chicago and even a few bands out in Pakistan and Indonesia. They took Knight’s book as a manifesto for a new kind of Islamic youth culture that respects women and gay people and isn’t afraid to challenge Islam.

(Bhattacharya, 2011)

The Times claimed that Knight’s influence went well beyond the taqwacore movement. It wrote,

[Knight] argues for a “more tolerant, more gender-inclusive, social-justice-oriented” form of Islam, championing heretical ideas, including female-led prayer. Knight has inevitably made enemies, but he remains an inspirational figure to thousands of culturally conflicted young Muslims.

(Dalton, 2010)

Ethnic Media

Once again, the coverage in American and British ethnic media often stood in stark contrast to mainstream news coverage, such as the lack of American triumphalism. *India Currents* observed, “Vote Hezbollah repeatedly point out that their name is a joke, but their song ‘Poppy Fields’ pulls no punches in its criticisms of American foreign policy” (Rockwell, 2009b). Nor was there any White savior to be found. Instead of painting Knight as the White guy reforming Islam, he is depicted as someone who chose Islam over Christianity and is deeply faithful to it. One article noted, “Knight, a convert to Islam, exhibits extensive knowledge and compassion for the religion, and that spirit is brought to life in [filmmaker] Zabra’s work” (Maimon, 2011).

Even when ethnic media give credit to Knight, Islam and the West remain on a much more equal footing in their coverage, evident in passages such as this:

In 2004, Michael Muhammad Knight wrote an extraordinary novel called *The Taqwacores*, which proposed that Islam and Punk Rock “aren’t so far removed as you’d think. Both began in tremendous bursts of truth and vitality but seem to have lost something along the way ...”

(Rockwell, 2009a)

News India Times pointed out the presence of extremists on both sides: “The (taqwacore) groups’ satirical and brash lyrics and song titles criticize both fundamentalist Islam and post-Sept. 11 ethnic and religious profiling” (Abdulrahim, 2009). *India Currents* also, to a certain extent, problematized the Islam–West dichotomy by highlighting the complexities within Muslim societies in the U.S. and elsewhere. One article noted, “It is not always a peaceful relationship, but the Taqwacore sensibility is an integral part of modern Muslim culture, and not just in America” (Rockwell, 2009b).

Conclusion

Studying frames comparatively reveals that (1) journalism is an interpretive process rather than an objective representation of reality and (2) journalistic interpretations are themselves derived from dominant cultural narratives as well as hegemonic social and political ideologies (Tuchman, 1978; Zelizer, 1993). This study has presented a comparative frame analysis of the taqwacore coverage in mainstream U.S. and U.K. media as well as English-language “ethnic” media in both countries. The main object of the analysis, in line with the agenda of this volume, is the U.S. media. But looking at U.S. news frames juxtaposed with British and ethnic news frames allows us to better understand the narratives and ideologies at work, where they spring from, and what purposes they serve.

Mainstream U.S. news outlets that covered taqwacore, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *International Herald Tribune*, followed the narrative that Muslims, as a rule, are primitive and out of sync with the modern world. Their backward mentality is at least partly responsible for breeding radicalism, even terrorism, in Muslim society. Most Muslims, in this narrative, are “bad Muslims” (Mamdani, 2004). Taqwacore, on the other hand, is “good” and is consciously attempting to reform Muslim society. All of taqwacore’s goodness is, however, *American* in origin—the subculture comprises American-born or American-bred youth, steeped in American cultural values. Moreover, it has been given life by a White American. In this manner, the U.S. news media simultaneously demonize Muslims as violent and ugly primitives, celebrate their own social

progressivism by conceding the possibility of “reform” in Muslim society, and eulogize America by suggesting that all that is good and praiseworthy happens to come from this country. America itself is represented through Knight as White and inclined to—indeed meant to—change the world in its own image. Such a change, in this worldview, constitutes progress and modernization—a change from bad to good. In their taqwacore coverage, the U.S. media thus vilify and marginalize Muslims while patting their own back and rallying around the metaphorical flag of American exceptionalism.

The British media follow the same trope to a large extent, except for replacing “America” with “the West” wherever possible. So Muslims as a rule remain primitive and bad in their coverage, while taqwacore members are good because they are modern and Western. Even the later framing of taqwacore as inauthentic reflects an underlying belief that there is much that is wrong with Muslim society and it is in need of reform—coupled with a realization that taqwacore is failing in this purpose. But such a purpose only exists within the narrative that the media weave, and the “inauthentic” framing of taqwacore only betrays the inauthenticity of the media narrative itself.

Just like the U.S. media, the U.K. media’s taqwacore coverage thus objectifies the Muslim community as primitive and oppressive, and naturalizes the need for Muslims to become more “West-like.” The trans-Atlantic prevalence of these frames suggests that the ideological underpinnings of U.S. media framing go deeper than mere American exceptionalism. It indicates the presence of what Said (1978) called the *postcolonial gaze*—the objectification of the colonized in the view of the colonizer that serves to relegate the colonized into an inferior and submissive position and naturalizes the power that the colonizer wields over them. It makes colonization a moral act. The presence of this gaze reveals just how deeply this colonialist sensibility pervades U.S. (and U.K.) media, suffusing even the coverage of a musical subculture.

However, the contrasting coverage in ethnic media shows this is not the only possible way of writing about taqwacore. In their coverage, there is no conflation of good with America or the West and bad with Muslims. America and Muslims are represented as complex social categories with not one or two but a variety of undercurrents running across and even against each other. Furthermore, their coverage suggests taqwacore is as much about challenging bigotry and oppression within Islam as it is about questioning the racism and hypocrisy prevalent in the U.S. and the West in general, especially the hypocrisy apparent in their relationship with Islam. By stressing that taqwacore is primarily a musical phenomenon, they uncover even deeper layers of its colonialist objectification in mainstream U.S. and U.K. media—indicating that taqwacore may not have been covered at all had it not been perceived as a modernist rebellion against a monolithic, premodern Islam (Kumar, 2010).

This chapter demonstrates that the racialized “othering” of Muslims in the U.S. media is not limited to coverage of acts of “terrorism” or other

instances of perceived Muslim radicalism, as previous research has noted (Chuang & Roemer, 2013; Kumar, 2010; Powell, 2011; Reese & Lewis, 2009). Even the coverage of a hybrid, immigrant, musical subculture related to Muslims and Islam takes the same shape and form, suggesting the presence of a deeper cultural instinct—an instinct that impels White Europe/America to view itself as superior to the Orient and justifies the conquest of other races as the White man's burden. News media share this broader social and political ideology as the natural order of things—and they serve to reproduce it across space and time. To be sure, such cultural impulses are neither instrumental nor deterministic. Subtle differences between British and U.S. coverage are evident even within the small sample of articles studied here. The presence of “ethnic” publications in these countries further complicates the trans-Atlantic public sphere. But the broad patterns of coverage in mainstream media cohere with the colonialist logic of White supremacy, Western modernity, and the naturalness of the Orient's subjugation.

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Conclusion

Looking Ahead

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In this book, we have set out to complicate the intersection between race and media. To date, there has been limited focus on the role of critical race theory in the world of media, which we have attempted to address here. We are at a moment in time in the United States where we are moving forward socially and navigating our experiences through these myriad media lenses.

In September 2015, the *New York Times* published an article called “Move Over, Millennials, Here Comes Generation Z” (Williams, 2015). This article compares Millennials (born between 1980 and 2000) to the next generation of Americans currently being born. These individuals, who are the teens and tweens of today, are experiencing the most technologically advanced society to date. Not only are they the ones being most targeted by industry through media and advertising, but they are also the ones who are interacting and shaping media as we know it. As a result, this next generation is the most technologically connected group in our society. Their everyday experiences are also heavily mediated through social media like Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and are the generation to almost exclusively access all of their media through a smartphone or similar device. They also have an extremely short attention span, evident in the popularity of short bursts of text and images like those in Snapchat and other messenger apps. As reported in the article, many in Generation Z have lived in our post-9/11 reality of fear. Thus, in many ways, they are more conscientious of the problems in the world.

This generation is also the most diverse we have ever seen. According to data the article quoted from the 2010 U.S. Census, the number of individuals who identify as mixed White-and-Asian grew by 84%. Additionally, the number who identify as mixed Black-and-White grew by 134% (Williams, 2015), which is exceptionally notable considering the long-rooted inequality and desegregation practices by Whites against Blacks in the United States. In this report, the U.S. Census also noted that the number of individuals who identify as “two or more races” has increased by over 2 million. No doubt that many of these are the young people who will make up our forthcoming society. The racial landscape is indeed changing. However, what remains to be seen is the extent to which these racialized ideologies change and form, and the relationship between our new society and its many forms of media.