This paper addresses two themes: Firstly, Islam and its representation in the media. Secondly, how media constructions of religious issues and their reception continue to shape assumptions about the nature of Islam and perhaps guide public attitudes towards (British) Muslims.

It is held in academic analyses that the media shapes the conceptualisation of the world. The media acts as a signifier and source of information for an increasing percentage of the population. As a consequence the manner by which Muslims and Islam are treated in the media affects the way they are perceived and understood by those receiving the media. This is because the media creates, reflects and enforces social representations:

"Social representations are socially shared and constructed representations that act as a fundamental backdrop for the construction of individual attitudes and beliefs. It has been noted many times that individuals often hold stereotypical beliefs about members of social groups with whom they have little or no contact. One way in which they are able to do this is because they are exposed to social representations of the target group in question, and ... that these are endorsed less critically if the individual has little direct knowledge of, or contact with, members of the group in question."3

British newspapers and television news networks address Islam and Muslims in a number of ways. It is important to understand the plurality of descriptions and the effect that is brought about among the British publics, particularly as an increasing number of news outlets describe Islam and Muslims as violent, unreasonable and incompatible with British society.4, 5 It is then conceivable that an increasing number of persons in Britain grow to believe that message and hold that as their outlook on that specific aspect of reality. The increasing association of Islam with violence and unwelcome/irrational behaviour raises questions about the extent to which the media is able to steer public opinion and foster attitudes towards Muslims and Islam. The interpretation of reality and news stories is done in light of the outlook held by people, whose views and behaviour toward others are to a large extent informed by their perception and interpretation of reality through media discourse.6 Therefore by looking at the way people understand and construct meaning from media (reception study) we can begin to understand how people’s conceptualisation of Islam and Muslims is being shaped and influenced by the media.

1 “the symbols used to create a representation” in LANGLOIS, G., ‘Meaning, Semiotics and Participatory Media’, Culture Machine, 12 (2011), (p. 5).
Media in all its varieties and forms contains the following characteristics:

1. Media are both constructed and construct reality;
2. The media have commercial implications;
3. Media have ideological and political implications;
4. Form and content are related in each medium, each of which has a unique aesthetic, codes, and conventions;
5. Receivers negotiate meaning in media.

These criteria are important to the research as media is a reflection of a constructed reality and in turn constructs reality. Therefore it is important to gather a greater understanding of the implications involving the media and the effect on its audience. The effect of the media on its audience is important as media inevitably contains commercial, ideological and political implications. With the analysis looking into the effect discourse is received special attention will be paid to the way the audience understands the codes, and conventions it receives whilst negotiating the meaning disclosed in the media.

The media both reflect and construct social and cultural life and interests and the place of religion within them: they are both products and shapers of public discourse. In recent years sociologists, theologians and religious studies scholars have produced research of theoretical and cultural significance on the changing relationship between religion and the media and the impact of (new) media on religion.

Important to note is that people’s thinking about religion(s) and those belonging to faith communities is formed against the backdrop of a plurality of sources of information, as well as cultural and ideological framing contexts. These include education, traditions, social conventions, media input and family upbringing to name a few. But within these information settings there are inherent pre-conceptions (assumptions), pre-judgements and misconceptions which play an authoritative role in shaping people’s thinking and behaviour. The conceptualisation of Islam and Muslims in turn is built upon the kinds and quality of information a person holds. People with little or no direct contact with Islam or Muslims the understanding of Islam and Muslims will rely largely on education, media reports and social conventions. It could be argued that without direct contact with in this case Muslims or Islam our own assumptions will remain uncontested and ground uncritical beliefs about them. This increases the likelihood that media, education and social convention are the only source of information for a large number of people.

W. Shadid states that “The media adds both in a direct and indirect manner to the dissemination of negative imagery concerning allochthonous people and might even play a role in their discrimination by society.” But as a subject reacts to the perceptions it garners from the media within their social context, thus taking their understandings and interpretations into the realm of human action and inter-action. Therefore the media plays an active part in shaping the viewpoints of people in society, who in turn become actors in society acting upon the views held by them that have been constructed by them from the media they have accessed. If this media is largely unrepresentative, biased, ideological, and unable to deal with the complexities accurately it can be conceived that these issues are taken into the realm of public discourse and interaction.

Yet with interpersonal contact being as it is and lacking of interaction based on sustained and mutual engagement with Muslims for people in Britain and Europe, the media remains a large source of information. As has been pointed out above the media forms primary understandings and interpretations of the issues it discusses. But if the media is the sole source of information on Islam and Muslims, it is not surprising that the meaning of Islam and Muslims to

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the public is that which is portrayed in the media. The issues raised, be they political, social or religious illustrate issues to the British public. However the manner by which the discourse takes place concerning those issues, shapes how the public is meant to relate to those issues. Yet if the issues that are discussed in the media are all similar (to each other) and one-sided, it is not surprising that the view held by the public is similar and one-sided.

It has been argued that the manner in which Islam is covered is narrow and many stories cover the same aspects repetitively. Not only are the topics that are covered of importance but also the manner by which the issues and news is presented is important when considering their effect on and interpretation by the audience. It is therefore not only what is covered that has an effect but also how it is covered.\textsuperscript{11}

Social practices inextricably involve acts of signification and meaning making that require analysis of the production, discussion and negotiation of the meanings and understandings held by people in a social context.

\textit{“Meaning is taken primarily as a condition under which a person’s life, or significant events in it, ‘make sense’ (i.e., have worth and relate to the subject’s feelings of integrity, wholeness, and self-mastery)”}\textsuperscript{12}

Thus the subjective interpretations people attach to their environments we have to take into account the socio-cultural influences that affect that process of attachment. Therefore it is noticeable that people are engaged in subjective meaning making from outside prompts. These prompts (i.e. the news) are crucial to the development of ideas, conceptualisations and opinions.

Additionally though, as S. Fish states that \textit{“the thoughts an individual can think and the mental operations he can perform have their source in some or other interpretive community, he is as much a product of that community (acting as an extension of it) as the meanings it enables him to produce.”}\textsuperscript{13} Therefore with media acting as a means of spreading frames of meaning within and throughout a community, it is logical to assume that the media affects and in some way enforces and in turn reflects the meanings a person is able to construct for himself. This process is extended when a person expresses his understanding to those around him, as that understanding is produced within the community he belongs to and coded in such a way that it is understandable within that specific context. This is a way specific news items affect a person’s understanding of Islam and Muslims, as a consequence of their conditioning by socio-cultural factors that enable him or her to produce meaning, as well as code and decode media reports to make sense to him or her. This follows on from the work done by H.G. Gadamer in \textit{Wahrheit und Methode}\textsuperscript{14} and his work on the process of textual interpretation. As H.G. Gadamer points out,

\begin{quote}
\textit{A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again some initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is true.}
\end{quote}

And although “text” is understood by Gadamer refer to the written word; this understanding can be extended to mean more than simply the written word. It is situated in a wider context and refers to a variety of narratives which not only includes text but also other forms, such as images and audio. As C.G. Prado illustrates the following:

\begin{quote}
\textit{“For Gadamer, understanding or interpretation – which for him is not a matter of deliberately trying to understand something, but is the essence of all understanding – is directed on truth because the objective of interpretation is to understand what is true.”}\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} STOKES, J., \textit{How to Do Media and Cultural Studies}, (SAGE Publications, 2003), pgs. 56-66.


But what is true is that which makes sense and that which makes sense has meaning. When things have meaning they are in a condition under which those items mentioned ‘make sense’ (as was illustrated earlier). Therefore the primary objective of understanding or interpretation is to create or produce meaning. It is the process of making sense of a narrative that is the process of interpretation. Yet this continual process of understanding as a result of the fusion of horizons between a previous state of Being and a latter state of Being has its origins in the encounter between the interpreter and the interpreted.

_Hermeneutics, especially as articulated by Gadamer in Truth and Method, begins nowhere if not with the concrete experience of understanding – an experience that arises in the encounter with a work of art, in the reading of a text, in the conversation with another person, in the simple appearing of things as thus and so. For this reason, hermeneutics has its origin in an event – the same event that Heidegger also called the event of truth (aletheia) – although it is an event that cannot be separated from our factical situatedness in the world. The event of understanding is no mere passive ‘happening’ but an active engagement, nor does it remain restricted to the subjective, but encompasses the world within which the subject, always standing in relation to others, is already embedded._16

We can therefore say that with the origins of interpretation being placed in a specific event, a time, a place and a social context. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the media is not only interpreted in light social protocols that contextualise the person viewing the report, but also that it is a product of those social protocols itself. Therefore there is a continual circularity in this process containing moments of interpretation, production, reflection and reaction.

In his discussion on Julia Kristeva’s work _The Revolution in Poetic Language_17, K.B. Jensen points out that among other things,

_Signs are defined in relation to other signs. By extension, texts acquire their meaning as part of a network of texts, past as well as present. Texts are momentary manifestations of a general textuality; texts selectively articulate cultural heritage. A culture could be understood as the most complex instance of intertextuality._18

News items understood here as texts are part of a larger collection of texts. Within this collection of texts and narratives, a particular text (such as a news item) is situated and constituted by the other texts of the collection. Therefore the text is constituted by the other texts in its history but also a reflection of its historicity. On top of that the text is only understood due to the Social representations that are shared. When these in turn act as a fundamental backdrop for the construction of individual attitudes and beliefs that which is represented and reflected is shared and reinforced. Thus in order to make sense of a particular text one has to not only be able to understand the text itself but it has to have meaning in the greater narrative one situates or associates oneself and the text to be in. The interpretation held is therefore a product of the intertextuality of both the consumer and/or audience and the text prompted for interpretation. The perception a person has of an item described in a report, is influenced by the coverage it has received as well as the social context the receiving subject finds themselves in at the time. People do not live in vacuums; they are a product of their social environment as a result of the time and space that they occupy. In turn the social element of a person greatly influences their interpretations and understandings. People understand media because “they already have learned cultural codes to understand what is presented to them”19

Having established that not only the content (what) but also the manner by which a topic is discussed (how) influences the understanding and reception of media reports, it is important to look further at how language itself

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plays an important role in the production of meaning. An example of this is the conclusions of experiments conducted by Elizabeth F. Loftus in the mid to late seventies on the reconstruction of car accidents which led her to conclude that there is direct link between the way a witness is questioned and the response he or she gave. In this case it was geared at certain types of verbs describing the collision and at what speed the respondents thought the collision took place. This suggests that when an event is reported in a news item a similar transfer of values can take place between the audience and the report. What is important here is that there is a correlation between language and the transfer of meaning. But as S. Hall points out, the media are the sources of both ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ definitions and ‘both have a bearing on how the problem will be seen and understood by the public’. Therefore we can state that the language and discourse used as well as the issues chosen for discussion influences the interpretation and understanding by the receivers of that media report on Islam and Muslims. In contemporary Britain an increasing percentage of the population relying on media as source of information and meaning, With certain structures guiding interpretation it is important to bear in mind how these structures of understanding affect certain interpretations. Interpretation is a never-ending requirement of life, the act of interpreting is something humans will do for all time in order to construct meaning into their existence. Following on from Charles Taylor’s work, meaning and interpretation are seen as a continuation of language. Seeing meaning as a constitutive element of language and interpretation is a necessary result of that meaning disclosed within language. This is similar to the effect noticed in the experiments described by Loftus that I referred to earlier. One cannot escape the judgments and processes that are built into the language one speaks, whether it is a natural language (e.g., English) or a specialized one (e.g. anthropology, sociology, philosophy etc.). There are inter-subjective meanings embedded in the social reality. And these are in turn expressed by individuals in language.

My conclusion is therefore an extension of the assertion that the subject’s interpretation of media reports and the action(s) or reaction(s) it elicits are existentially situated and conditioned. They are ‘the result of a combination of both a biographical past as well as a cultural past (tradition), and as such, fashions the ‘hermeneutical situation’ of the interpreter.’ Therefore this undoubtedly influences to the interpretation of media items, as a result of that existential element. The subject’s particular existence as an extension of his socio-cultural environment cannot be overlooked as a contributing factor in the interpretation of media items. However this alone is does not make the media reports unaccountable. The responses by particular people in their socio-cultural environment are as much a consequence of the prompted media items as it is their socio-historical context. The understanding of television viewing and interpretation is an extension of textual interpretation and as such also the product of a fusion of horizons. This is according to Wilson constituted by the fact that there exists a tradition of television viewing in contemporary Britain (the western world). With the understanding that a

“Particular interpretation results from a particular pre-structuring, which itself is shaped by a particular socio-cultural situation, a justifiable assumption is that individuals, inhabiting the same collectively, interpret texts in a similar fashion. ... Understanding, restricted as it is to human historicity, is also temporal and bounded. ... Therefore understanding is inevitably and irretrievably anchored to one’s historical and cultural situation.”

It is therefore possible to make tentative claims on the basis of the analysis put forth that the individuals who inhabit the same collective community are directly affected by the media reports they view as well as indirectly shape the production of reports. As for example has been seen in the conflict in Rwanda, there was an active role played by the media in shaping people’s opinions and conceptualisations that their actions and interactions were a consequence

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26 Harindranath, R., p. 81.
of. This also culminated in the imprisonment of the leading figures of Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, for war crimes and crimes against humanity because of the influence that they had and the manner by which they used their position to slowly and subtly brainwash the public into buying into their rhetoric. Therefore it would be naïve to think that the media in Britain does not affect its audience in a similar manner, although fortunately the rhetoric is currently different. But with the growing numbers of far-right organisations such as the English Defence league, the absorption of the media rhetoric and inaccurate data and information by members the public is noticeable.

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