Britishness and Community Cohesion in Muslim News Online

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Abstract
The issues of British national identity and social cohesion have become pressing concerns within the multicultural fabric of contemporary British society. The increasing number of immigrants and their offspring, along with the maintenance of their cultural roots, seem to represent a serious defiance to social cohesion and the alleged “purity” of Britishness. A number of race related reports were produced by the official authorities to churn out the necessary steps to be followed by the British (immigrants and host community) in order to keep social stability and community cohesion. Thus, the politics of community cohesion came to the fore as the neologism of contemporary British political discourse. Such new discourse of governance has been digested and processed differently by different mass media. It has been decoded, for instance, preferably by mainstream news agencies like BBC News Online. However, arguably, it is read appositionally or at best negotiated by ethnicity-related news agencies such as Muslim News Online. In this article, attempt has been made to adopt media discourse analysis tools to decipher the ways Muslim News Online decoded and then encoded the hegemonic official discourses of Britishness and community cohesion. A critical and interpretative approach is used to accomplish such study. The corpus of this study is primarily extracted from the website of the Muslim News Online.

Key words: Britishness, community cohesion, multiculturalism, new media, discourse analysis.

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1. Introduction

Muslim News Online is one of the most influential websites of British Muslim communities. This article employs some discourse analysis tools in order to study the interaction of this website with the contemporary British hegemonic discourses of community cohesion and Britishness. It is suggested that Muslim News Online decoded those discourses in a more or less negotiated manner so as to avoid clashes and unnecessary confrontations with mainstream zeitgeist that prioritizes what has been called a “neo-assimilationist” ideology. Such ideology affirms that multiculturalism has become the problem not the solution to British tensed race relations. The study opted for an electronic news agency because of the increasing centrality of internet and websites in contemporary media studies.

2. Why websites?

With the emergence of the web-based means of communication, a new phase of communication studies found its raison d’être. New media paved the way for new readings of what it means to be communicative at the end of the 20th and early 21st century. However, the traditional communication theory seems to have ignored such web-based technology. The web seems not to fit the existent theoretical models and difficult to handle. Yet, it yielded new horizons for communication theory; and it seemed to be impossible to wink at them. Morris and Ogan (1996) argue:

that if mass communications researchers continue to largely disregard the research potential of the Internet, their theories about communication will become less useful. Not only will the discipline be left behind, it will also miss an opportunity to explore and rethink answers to some of the central questions of mass communications research, questions that go to the heart of the model of source-message-receiver with which the field has struggled. (Journal of Computer Mediated Communication)

The internet and web-based mass communication in general present a new communicative space in which other forms of media converge and interact. It is a combination of different models of communication. Most traditional forms of mass media are basically a “one-to-many” model of communication in which one media conglomerate is the sender of a message that would be decoded by a mass audience. It is not so clear how the message (code) will be read, but the essential is that a message is encoded by one group of media professionals to be consumed by as many audiences as possible; by a mass audience. Within such paradigm of media communication, such audience is often seen as a consumer that tended to be more passive than active. Even audience empowering theories such as that of Stuart Hall’s Reception Theory did not detail how the audience can resist dominant media mechanism.

However, computer-mediated communication is often a 'one-to-many' model. Nevertheless, it also takes the form of 'many-to-one' communication. This 'many-to-one' model of communication stands as a hybrid between mass communication (one-to-many) and interpersonal communication (one-to-one). This feature renders it a rich medium that inherits all the characteristics of other media combined. Moreover, the graphic user
interface (GUI) of the web offers the possibility of “many-to-many” communication that adds more to web-based media in terms of diversity, elasticity and universality. Thus, according to Robert Burnett and David Marshall: “The Web allows anyone to be a sender or a receiver, anyone can send or receive personal or mass messages, and information can be provided by many and accessed by many as a mass audience or stored for individuals to select or retrieve” (Burnett and Mrasal, 2002, p.47). Thus, internet seems to blur the boundaries between different models of communication and set the stage for a diverse and flexible array of communicative possibilities. Also, web pages are so complex; they are made up of almost all types of audio-visual and graphic materials. Nina Wakeford best expresses such web complexity and richness. She wrote that: “Web pages are simultaneously computer code, cultural representations, material objects for consumption and the outcome of skilled labour”. (Wakeford, 2000, p.31).

News online is thus a new genre that mixes the traits of conventional genres simultaneously. As suggested earlier, it is a combination of various conventional media. It has a greater scope and potential of news and views dissemination. Thus, a single coding mechanism can integrate and employ video, audio and photos. Moreover, electronic and web-based news offer an unlimited and diverse amount of information which can be complied in one textual space. The hyper-textuality of the web adds to its data density and interrelatedness. Equally important, the web creates a net of interactive spaces with ever-changing sets of interlocutors.

Jean Aitchison and Diana M. Lewis (2003) described the way online news is delivered. They wrote:

Online delivery is based on the combination of a small screen and a vast storage capacity. Presentation is therefore piecemeal, yet unbounded spatially or temporally. The tension between this atomization of information into small chunks and the gathering together of vast resources points to a database model: a relational information structure in which each news element can participate, at different levels of relevance, in a range of news structures (P. 96).

Obviously, web-based news is thus shaped by the medium through which it is delivered. The technical nature of the medium turns out to be the message itself. The features of the web provide its users with infinite possibilities of articulation and expression. Also the audience is active and can be in many times the producer not only the receiver of data.

Web-based media texts include a rich texture that is woven from a variety of hypertexts, sounds, graphics, images, videos, executable files, and hypermedia. Just like other forms of media texts, web pages can be read as cultural representations. Many web critics attempted to scrutinize not only the technical and aesthetic aspects of the web but also its cultural and semiotic ones. Their goal was to churn out the various political, cultural and ideological outputs and messages expressed and disseminated via such web pages. For instance, British media critic Daniel Chandler offered a theoretical framework for the analysis of web pages (Chandler, 1995). The idea was to appraise cultural significance of web pages according to their thematic, semiotic and technical contents and properties.
Chandler introduced the concept of “Generic features” by which he means the identification of a cluster of characteristics of the web. Such features can be divided into five different sections: themes, modes of address, technical features, formulaic structures and iconography. Nevertheless, such “Generic Features” –in their Chandlerian version— are used to analyse personal and private web pages. They trace and study the socio-cultural and political everyday experiences of individuals. For instances, weblogs can be a pertinent example of such personal web pages.

Building on Chandler’s “Generic Features” Nina Wakeford argues that those generic features can be applied to other types and genres of web-based texts. Thus, the personal themes of private web pages can be extended to express public and collective concerns; the individual-oriented question of “who am I?” can be reshaped to answer group-oriented question of “who are we?”. Also formulaic structures that highlight personal idiosyncrasies can be substituted by larger cultural forms and characteristics of a group, organization or community. In addition, modes of address, iconography and technical features would develop and change to respond to the necessities of the new web pages.

However, web pages, being cultural textures, require an approach that locates them within their wider contexts of production. Hence, it is of paramount importance to identify and uncover the socio-cultural patterns and institutions that led to the creation of such web pages. Wakeford considers such extra-web patterns and institutions as pivotal in web studies. She inquires: “How can we make statements about cultural patterns and social structure as a part of studies of the web”. Then she suggests that “one way is to expand the boundaries of our data collection beyond textual and semiotic analysis, and to consider the technical, social and political infrastructure of web pages” (Wakeford, 2000: 35). Web pages are not free-floating signs; they are, rather, textual and semiotic embodiment of socio-cultural means of production. Web pages stand as cultural repertoires. They constitute, to use Jean Chalaby phrase, a “class of texts” which are interconnected textually; yet they can voice out various and different social and cultural messages and values. The American media sociologist Susan Leigh Star (1999) emphasized the importance of contextual infrastructure in understanding textual structure. Star’s “Ethnography of Infrastructure” stressed the need to study the discursive configurations of extra-textual factors so as to understand the codes of any web page.

This article suggests that what is displayed online has been the outcome of socio-cultural and ideological discourses. In other words, the online is the production of the offline. Muslim News Online web pages are framed and understood within the everyday discursive formations of the institutions in question. However, analysing web pages is a multi-dimensional activity. It is crucial to remember that a web page is often (but not always) an electronic version of a hard material (e.g. a broadsheet newspaper). Thus it is vital to trace the differences between the two versions in terms of graphology and layout. Also it is important to show how lexical cohesion in web pages relates to the overall discourse structure. This, in turn, raises questions about what can be called the context of reception when reading a web article as opposed to reading a printed article.
Building on the hybridity of media in the web, it has been argued in this article that such audio-video and graphic varieties, despite their complexities, help construct and encode specific cultural representations that promote and cultivate certain hegemonic views regarding the post-2001 race-related discourses in Britain. Such hegemony construction is hypothesized to be the job of influential media news agencies like British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). An alternative reader of dominant codes is the Muslim News Online which is arguably engaged in an oppositional reading of the dominant version of reality originally presented by mainstream British political discourses. Thus, web pages of the Muslim News Online websites constitute “cultural texts”, to use Nina Wakeford phrase, that shape certain views and values in line with its ideological orientations and with the auxiliary of web-based tools and techniques. Moreover, they seem to represent a liberating and empowering force. They go beyond the traditional frames of time and space and operationalize the audiences’ creative, interactive and participatory potentials. Aitcison and Lewis stress such empowering and innovating traits of the web. They argue (2003) that:

> Online, boundaries blur between mass and personal communication, between the published and the unpublished, between news and information, and between geographically-defined communities and peer-defined communities (p.102).

What follows is a cultural and critical analysis of some community cohesion and Britishness-related electronic articles in Muslim News Online.

3. **Britishness and community cohesion in Muslim News Online**

This online magazine is selected for a number of reasons; the most important of which is that it represents an eminent voice for Muslim ethnic minorities. Typically, the magazine popularizes the slogan that it represents “News and Views of Muslims in the United Kingdom - which renders it a fertile database for this study.

It has been suggested that ethnic minorities and especially Pakistani and Bangladeshi minorities (Muslim) constitute a challenge to mainstream British social cohesion. Thus, to study the discourses of Muslim News Online is an opportunity to shed the light on a potentially oppositional point of view.

It was noticed that the number of articles dealing with social cohesion and Britishness is relatively small (about 100). There seems to be a strategy of avoiding such tricky issues of race relations and multiculturalism in this web site. When cohesion and Britishness are mentioned, it tends to focus mainly on their relation to Muslim communities without being discussed within their wider mainstream context. This observation tempted to postulate that British Muslims tend to avoid confrontation with mainstream discourses in order not to intensify what they perceive as already-tensed inter-cultural relations. Muslim News Online readings tend to negotiate mainstream discourses of Britishness and community cohesion more than opposing them. However, it is hypothesized that Muslim News Online is not merely reflecting the dominant reading of the situation but it tried to embed its own agenda in what appeared to be a negotiating tone. Its ideological and cultural traits are enshrined in the articles produced. Yet it is vital, to expose some aspects of Muslims’
experience and images in British mainstream popular culture and media in order to understand the constraints within which Muslim News Online has been working.

3.1 Anti-Muslim and anti-Islam tendencies in the British national media and popular culture

The images of Islam and Muslims in the West and Britain in particular have been suffering from a considerable level of prejudice, ignorance and stereotypes. Edward Said’s *Covering Islam* (1997) and *Orientalism* (1995), and Elizabeth Poole’s *Reporting Islam* (2002) and Zaki Badawi’s *Islam in Britain* (1981) have been delineating and identifying the ways Islam and Muslims are represented in Western media and culture. Muslims are thus frequently represented as the Other who is the anti-thesis of the Occident. Western culture and character seem to stand in opposition to Islamic cultures and ways of life. Such difference has been read negatively which seemed to promote conflict and misunderstanding between those two cultural “poles”. The Orientalist discourse “illustrates the tendency to regulate the Orient and its societies, and reflects, in turn, the power relation manifested in the dominating attitude of the West towards the Orient– itself a creation of this dominating dichotomous attitude” (Elgamri, 2008, p.19)

Muslims in Britain, being the first ethnic minority, seem to embody such difference. The politics of multiculturalism have been regarded as a source of socio-cultural troubles. The race-related events of 2001 in some northern British cities, in which considerable sections of Muslim populations were included, were an “ideal” opportunity for New Labour governments to denounce multiculturalism and seek for new assimilationist politics. Identity politics and community cohesion policies became the new rhetoric of governance in contemporary Britain. Thus, Muslims and their culture became a prime target to such new assimilationist discourses. Moreover, Islam and Muslims have been stereotyped negatively in western popular and media culture.

Obviously, the legitimate critical analysis of Muslim politics, society or culture permits the debating of opinions and practices with which one disagrees. Muslim culture, like all other cultures, is not flaw-free or perfect. But this does not mean that the ‘extreme’ and ‘cruel’ treatment directed against women by some extremists, for example, should become a license for blanket criticism of Islam or Muslims in Britain.

Also, it is of paramount importance to indicate that not all the British media are (or were) biased against Muslims. A certain paper (say *The Sun*) or audio-visual medium (say ITN) is not monolithic in its presentation of anti-Muslim stereotypes. For instance, on November 12, 1991, the *Sun* severely criticized multi-cultural curricula for Muslims in Birmingham, but declared 10 years later that “Islam is not an evil religion”, and urged Britons to be more sensitive to Muslim concerns about stereotyping” (Bungalowala, 2002). However, for the aim of the present research, negative and stereotypical representations are emphasised, although we should remember the balanced, and even openly pro-Islam, ones. (For instance, Islam and Islamic culture have been celebrated and recognised in education as a part of the multicultural curriculum.)

The current debate on representations of Islam and Muslims in the British media suggests that Islam is demonised and distorted by the West. The ‘distortion’ and creation of
negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims spring from ‘ignorance’ rather than knowledge of Islam (Runnymede Trust, 1997). *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, published by the Runnymede Trust in 1997, provides a list of ‘closed views’ on Islam which the media seems to reflect over the years. Those closed views are-

1. Islam is monolithic, static and unresponsive to new realities (homogenized entity)
2. Islam is other and separate
3. Islam is different and inferior
4. Islam is aggressive and hostile
5. Muslims are manipulative and religiously insincere
6. Muslim criticisms of ‘the West’ are rejected or at best under-estimated
7. Discriminating behaviour against Muslims is defended or at best ignored
8. Anti-Muslim discourse and hostility are accepted as natural and normal.
   (Runnymede Trust, 1997)
9. The national media (especially the press) tend to build their images of Muslim minorities on closed views of Islam. Differences among and between Muslim cultures are ignored or played down. This ignorance of the diversity within Islam turns “criticisms in the British media of countries such as Iraq, Iran or Saudi Arabia” into “coded attacks on Muslims in places such as Bradford, Birmingham or Tower Hamlets” .(Runnymede Trust, 1997)

Besides, the black activist Chris Searle (1989) focused on how *The Sun* tended to represent diverse issues in a sensational manner that seem to create inter-ethnic tensions and, thus, contribute to more segregation along cultural divides. Searle concluded that *The Sun’s* coverage of race-related issues was “hostile to the labour movement in general and to black people they can cast as ‘extremist’ or ‘militant’ in particular”. *The Sun*, according to Searle, was an extremely nationalist, conservative paper.

As far as Muslim Arabs and Asians are concerned, Searle showed how *The Sun* depicted their culture and religious belief with contempt both internationally and at home. *The Sun* used cartoons to convey its messages; it exploited the Honeyford Affair (See the endnote) in Bradford to present a cartoon that depicted Bradfordian Pakistanis as barbaric and violent. Such cartoons imply that Muslims are violent, illiberal and have an instrumental or manipulative view of their religion. It should not be forgotten that *The Sun* is a notoriously partisan paper, targeting trade unions, lesbians, liberals and Blacks as well as Muslims. What is being shown is the discourse of the attacks on Muslims. Another Islamophobic discourse was put forward by the columnist Carol Sarler (in *The People*, January 1995). She criticized pro-Muslim measures in Britain, and attacked Muslim cultural and religious practices:

[W]ith the wishy-washy excuse that ‘It’s their culture’, we are supposed to tolerate idiots slaughtering goats on streets in Bradford and wealthy bigger groups building mosques on streets everywhere ...inside these mosques they encourage the murder of Salman Rushdie, a British citizen, as decreed by a dead idiot in Iran, but, say the liberals, don’t worry about that: let’s change OUR religious services instead, to make sure WE don’t cause offence. And so
we get schoolchildren denied the fun of singing Christmas carols – and, while we’re at it, let’s cancel the food of British tradition and serve halal food at inner city council meetings. (1997)

The word ‘idiot’ is used to refer to Muslims. Linking Muslims in Britain to the ‘dead idiot in Iran’ echoes and bestows credibility on the “fifth column” thesis; a fifth column is an organised group of people working for the enemy within a country at war. Muslims are represented in the above extract as irrational, violent agents of backward and strange regimes or groups, a threat to British values, who suppress freedom of speech by burning books.

On the other side, there are some Muslim leaders and academics who emphasized the importance of negotiating popularized negative stereotypes of Muslim communities in Britain in order to cast different representations of such communities. For instance, Dr. Zaki Badawi, one of the most distinguished Muslim scholars in Britain, stressed the importance of creating more positive representations of British Muslim community. He coined the term “British Islam” (O’ Sullivan, 2006) in order to set up avenues of interfaith dialogue which would eradicate entrenched stereotypes of Islam and Muslims as irrational and self-isolating communities.

To sum up, the above stated brief samples of negative media coverage of Islam and Muslims – though they are few and though the use of virulent cartoons is an aspect of British culture that has long been accepted – are likely to foster Islamophobic and xenophobic attitudes, and worsen the already disadvantaged situation of British Muslims in general and Muslim Pakistanis in particular (the mass of the Muslim population in Britain). To follow Hall’s model, the media seems to construct ‘commonsense’ images of Muslims; a kind of shared consensus that Muslims and Islamic cultures are different, inferior, aggressive and manipulative. Thus, Islam is presented as the antithesis of mainstream British religio-cultural values. Within such a ‘meaningful explanatory context’, the media encodes an anti-Muslim message which the audience is to decode accordingly (at least, from the decoders’ point of view). This, of course, should not underestimate some attempts to represent Islam and Muslims positively.

Yet the goal of this section is to identify the cultural and ideological context that seems to control the production of mass-mediated output by Muslim News Online. It is not such a friendly context. The question is rather to what extent Muslim News Online and other ethnic media can voice out their interests without clashing with dominant mainstream readings of sensitive issues of cultural identity and politics.

3.2 The “negotiation tone” of the Muslim News Online

“News and Views of Muslims in the United Kingdom” is the slogan that appears in every web page of the Muslim News Online. The paper was set up in 1990 to be a medium that represents the voices of British Muslim communities. A number of articles will be dealt with in order to identify the attitudes of Muslims regarding their understandings of the problems and their configurations of the solutions to the rising issues of multicultural identity and community cohesion.
However, our analysis of the selected articles suggests that there is a lesser straightforward focus on the concepts of “community cohesion” and “Britishness”. The bulk of articles being studied highlight rather the causes, aspects and consequences of “racism”, “discrimination” and “segregation”. It seems that Muslim News Online tends to follow a strategy of avoidance when it comes to mainstream high profile issues.

Mohibur Rahma in his article, entitled “Analysis of the citizenship, nationality and asylum White Paper: Secure Borders, Safe Haven” (Muslim News Online, 2002), criticizes the discourses and ideological underpinnings of the then New Labour governments. He shows that David Blunkett, being the then Home Secretary, produced a document that casts South Asians and some of their cultural practices as deviant from the acceptable and familiar norms. Blunkett, typically, considered the practice of “arranged marriages” as unacceptable and considered it as a violation of human rights. Such official discourses were deemed as an attack on some well-established cultural choices of a certain section of British ethnic population notably Muslims. Rahma deliberately attacks such official discourses and accuses them of lack of sensitivity and precision. He states that:

“No mention is made of the consent, let alone participation of their children in the process which is the hallmark of many modern ‘arranged’ Asian marriages and a legal necessity in Muslim marriages. Such careless language blurs the distinction between ‘arranged’ marriages and ‘forced’ marriages, a distinction the Home Office has previously upheld admirably.” (Muslim News Online, 2002)

Mohibur Rahma uses what can be called a “contrastive discourse” when referring to anti-Asians discourses in Blunkett’s document. He states what is said in that document and then immediately opposes it with alternative arguments and comments thus creating in his article a discoursal equilibrium. The article is full with lexical items expressing contrast such as “however”, “but”, “yet”, “nevertheless” and “in contrast”. This reflects, perhaps, the oppositional nature of the article. The example below shows clearly how such dialectical and dialogical relationship is entrenched between the two allegedly antithetical discourses:

“The Home Office identifies a lack common values or a shared civic identity as one of the reasons behind the disturbances last summer. Yet it is hard to imagine their anger and frustration at the lack of civic values on the streets of Bradford was the cause of the anger displayed by White and Asian youth. It is more likely that material considerations featured higher-up on their list of priorities: unemployment, lack of proper housing and racial and religious discrimination. So for the current generation of young people living in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, this document holds out little promise”.

(Muslim News Online, 2002)

Structurally, the editor starts with the targeted discourses; that is that of David Blunkett or more generally official discourses of community cohesion and national identity. To speak about “common values or a shared civic identity” is to invoke the fundamental principles upon which any cohesive society is built. The absence of those values is likely to result
into socio-cultural fragmentation and even violence. Thus proceeded the official discourses. However, we immediately encounter the oppositional reading of Muslim News Online and we get the other officially unsaid part of the story. The use of the lexical item “yet” creates such contrastive oppositional mood and consequently we discover that lack of community cohesion is rather the product of material considerations and factors than of more abstract issues of identity and values. The problems of “unemployment, lack of proper housing and racial and religious discrimination” loom large in the reasons behind social and urban unrest. Finally, a conclusion is drawn from such “discoursal confrontations”. Based on the alternative reading, the editor assumes that the document could not be a source of hope to ethnic minorities in question.

The same pattern is repeated throughout the article: starting with dominant or official discourses then producing an alternative, often an oppositional one and ultimately reaching a conclusion that embeds alternative world view while opting for consensual tone.

The editor seems to appraise the document negatively. The article teems with negative adjectives and modifiers when referring to dominant official discourses. Thus, the arguments and comments, appearing in “White Paper: Secure Borders, Safe Haven”, are “insulting”, “a shame”, “disturbing”, “careless”, “clumsy”, “inflammatory” and “insensitive”. Such negative lexical choices best express the seemingly oppositional tone of this article in particular and that of Muslim News Online in general.

However, it is crucial to notice that the article attempts to negotiate dominant official discourses to offer its own views. That would serve the ideological socio-cultural needs of Muslim community in Britain. The editor criticizes dominant readings of the situation but he does not annihilate them absolutely. Rather he builds on them and offers an amended and negotiated version of the reality in question. He states that the document contains some fruitful comments but he refuses what he saw as “insensitive approach”. He affirms: “This clumsy and insensitive approach tars even positive suggestions.” Accordingly, there is something positive and constructive in dominant discourses providing that they employ a more positive and constructive approach. For instance, Muslims, according to Rahma, agree that mastering English language is a need to integrate in British mainstream society but they have reservations concerning its being deemed as a “compulsion” by the authorities. Also, they accept some positive suggestions concerning arranged marriages and consider that a “discussion within the community about whether more marriages could be undertaken in the UK rather than abroad is in itself a welcome development.” However, they refuse the accusations that all arranged marriages are “forced” or worst “bogus”.

What follows from this analysis is that there are no absolute dominant or oppositional discourses but just constantly negotiated ones. The dialogical nature of the concept of discourse itself means that no discourse is definitely hegemonic or dominant. Each hegemony contains the seeds of its counter-hegemony. Thus, it seems that there is no escape from presenting a diversity of attitudes and worldviews in any consideration of community cohesion or Britishness in Britain.
The multitude of readings of Blunkett’s document was so acute that it allowed the possibility of absolute antithetical readings of its objectives. In an editorial of the Muslim News Online, produced few days after the publication of Blunkett’s document, entitled “Blunkett’s lost opportunity” (Muslim News Online, 2002), we discover that:

“The Home Secretary’s White Paper, Secure Borders, Safe Haven can be seen as either a genuine attempt to initiate a discussion on future legislation to strengthen the fabric of society, or a contentious and scarcely disguised attack on settled and to-be-settled non-white Britons and their cultural and social norms: the principle targets being Imams, self-excluding minority communities who won’t or can’t integrate sufficiently and Asian marriage mores.” (Muslim News Online, 2001)

The multi-semiotic nature of the document could pave the way (as it has been the case) to different understandings which reflect, first the high ambiguity of the race-related discourses in contemporary Britain and second the lack of a definite and absolute solution to problems of identity and cohesion in an increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural Britain. Such ambiguous and indeterminate realities resulted into inter-ethnic clashes that culminated in the race-related disturbances of 2001.

The race “riots” of 2001 have been largely seen as maker and marker of the lack of community cohesion and unified British identity. However, an alternative version of reality immediately appears in Muslim News Online website. “Causes of disturbances in inner cities” (Muslim News Online, 2001) is another article written by Mohibur Rahma few days after the events. To begin with, seemingly, there have been many differences in identifying the causes and aspects of such events. Even the terminology used to refer to them is strikingly different. While dominant official discourses used the term “riots” to describe such events, alternative discourses opted for “disturbances” or “unrest”. This has crucial impacts, we believe, on the perceived extent and influence of those events. While dominant discourses highlight the depth and danger of those events, alternative ones tend to regard them as minor and transient.

The article above presents contrastively different explanations of the causes of the social unrest that beset some British cities in the summer of 2001. The dominant official discourses frame the “riots” within the context of ethnic residential segregation, lack of community cohesion and a weak sense of national identity. Nevertheless, Rahma offers alternative explanations. His explanations seem to be more “materialist” in that they see race “riots” as the outcome of economic and race-related behavioral factors. We learn from his analysis that the North West, where the disturbances took place, is “one of the poorest regions of the country. According to the Government’s own figures, six of the top ten most deprived wards in England are in this region” (Muslim News Online, 2001). Then he argues that:

“Poverty and social exclusion is a necessary, but not sufficient precondition for the disturbances. Other factors such as racial segregation, lack of trust, racism and an element of criminality all have their roles in due proportions and contrived to deliver such disastrous events” (Muslim News Online, 2001).
Those alternative factors seem to contradict with the hegemonic representations of the causes of the lack of community cohesion and a sense of common identity in contemporary Britain. In addition, the article affirms that such problems are not the exclusivity of South Asians or Muslims. Other ethnic minorities, including the mainstream white majority, are included.

What is crucial to notice from such alternative “oppositional” analysis is that both dominant and counter-dominant representations of the issues of community cohesion and Britishness, agreed that there is a problem, but they differed in expounding its causes, aspects as well as its potential solutions. The Muslim News Online recognizes the existence of social fragmentation, epitomized in the lack of common core values, but offered a new set of justifications and explanations. Also, it considered the hegemonic explanations as incomplete and partial. The identified alternative causes along with generally mainstream ones are deemed as a genuine threat to British future race relations. There is a double problem in such antithetical versions of reality. First, there is the problem itself (lack of community cohesion and national identity) and second a misreading of the problem (seen in the various and even opposite representations of its causes). Interestingly, the article agrees with the dominant version of reality that such “explanatory confusion” “saps away at the very heart and soul of a community” (Muslim News Online, 2001).

Such conclusion, we believe, paves the way for the subsequent more moderate and negotiational tones within the article. Later in the body of the article, it is suggested that the New Labour governments did a lot to remedy the economic and racial triggers of race-related disturbances. The author states some of the official political and financial initiatives to tackle the material causes of the events such as “Single Regeneration Budget (£1.2 billion for Round 6), the New Deal for Communities (worth £1.2 billion over three years) and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (£800 million over 2001/02). (Muslim News Online, 2001)

However, such pro-government discourses immediately lapse into critical ones. The article ends with stressing the inadequacy of such official initiatives and the need to do more in order to avoid similar disturbances in the future. The modality turns into a deontic one which gives the speaker a certain power to suggest a direct change of the reality in question. The article argues that: “If the Government is serious about averting future racial disturbances in the North West, it must address the socio-economic causes of deprivation, because it remains the single most important factor.” (Muslim News Online, 2001)

The use of the first type of the conditional form expresses the probability of a potential for change, but such change is governed by the fulfillment of a certain condition: the addressing of socio-economic causes of deprivation. However, the use of conditional is equated with the use of the deontic modal “must” which is a “strong” modal used to express obligation. Such linguistic choices, we argue, suggest that the speaker assumes a certain authority on the audience. In this case, the speaker is Muslim News Online (second-order representor of reality) and the receiver is the government (the prime definer
of reality). Roles seem to have changed, at least linguistically, and the counter-hegemonic discourse turns out to be hegemonic.

In a similar article, entitled “The riots are a wake-up call: Both Muslim community and the government have to wrestle with some serious questions” (Muslim News Online, 2001), Zia Sarar, Muslim News Online journalist, suggests almost the same alternative causes. He states that: “A potent combination of poverty and social exclusion, alienated youth, lack of impartiality in the police force, and – the fuse – involvement of the British National Party” (Muslim News Online, 2001) is of paramount importance in explaining the causes of “race” riots and hence the lack of social cohesion and Britishness. However, the article adds an important factor. To our surprise, the excessive sentiments of Britishness of second and third generations of ethnic minorities are behind their attack against hegemonic conceptions of Britishness. Thus, being deprived of the advantages of belonging to mainstream British identity was a source of increasing frustration among those generations. Zia Sarar affirms: “But the new generation of British Muslims see themselves neither as migrants nor as victims. But as British, full stop.” (Muslim News Online, 2001). Importantly, the use of the conjunction “but” serves a crucial function. It creates a mood of contrast between two antithetical and competing discourses regarding the identity of ethnic minorities vis-à-vis that of the mainstream British one. It is generally perceived that the differences in cultural values between ethnic minorities and host society create such irreversible socio-cultural mismatches. Such mismatches lead to lack of communication and thus to segregation which in turn leads to absence of community cohesion. However, according to the above-mentioned explanations of Sarar, it is the systematic exclusion of minorities from Britishness that undermined Britishness itself. The concept of exclusion is cast, accordingly, as the key to understand why Britain is suffering from lack of common and inclusive British identity and social harmony. Throughout the article, the hegemonic governmental discourses are accused of entrenching social fragmentation disunity while pretending to defend community cohesion and a unified and unifying Britishness. The author argues that: “New Labour is in danger of generating only one form of multiculturalism: the cultures of the haves and have nots as increasingly separate and distinct ways of life and expectations.” (Muslim News Online, 2001)

However, as suggested in the previously analyzed articles, this article also vacillates between negotiational and oppositional readings. While accusing the official discourses of encouraging social fragmentation indirectly, the author (and thus, we believe, Muslim News Online) attempts to produce a more balanced reading of the problem. True that mainstream dominant British whites played their role in that problem of lack of community cohesion and Britishness, but “targeted” ethnic communities and notably Muslim ones did also contribute to that mismatch. At the end of the article, we learn that Muslims have a share in such misunderstanding. The author states that Muslim community has some intrinsic dysfunctional practices that hinder its advancement and success in Britain. According to his version, it lacks democratic behavior in its selection of its leaders. Thus, Muslims need to “realise that the days of community organisations with
un-elected life presidents, semi-literate and self-styled leaders, and warring mosque committees are over.” (Muslim News Online, 2001).
Within the same line of thought, the article urges that: “the Muslim community needs to confront some deep philosophical and existential questions. For example, what constitutes, and how we can create, a genuine British Muslim identity? What is there within the wider community with which we can integrate without losing our distinctiveness?” (Muslim News Online, 2001). The interrogative mood with which the discourse ends highlights a state of uncertainty which not only the author but also the whole British Muslim community seem to experience. Arguably, the same questions proposed here, are also found in many hegemonic discourses. Race-related reports analyzed also attempt to problematize and then normalize the ways the ethnic identity (of course, Muslim identity holds a central position in that scheme) can become compatible with mainstream British value system.
Obviously, Muslim News Online attempts to serve two functions in its treatments of some tricky issues like those of social cohesion and national identity. First, it negotiates dominant and hegemonic readings of the causes and aspects of community fragmentation and lack of cohesion. Second, while doing so, it embeds its own version of the reality without conflicting with that of mainstream media and politics. This would, we believe, serve the specific interests of ethnic minority in general, and Muslim one, in particular, while avoiding socio-cultural, and ideological clashes with dominant readings of the situation in question. The strategy of avoidance adopted by Muslim News Online enabled it to be on the safe and to vacillate continuously between the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic race-related discourses.

4. Conclusion and Findings
This article attempted to trace the way community cohesion and especially Britishness were treated in Muslim News Online. A critical and interpretative study was conducted using some discourse analytical tools. Also, a brief historical survey of the news agency in question was performed the aim of which was to situate its media outputs within their different contexts. That is so important to understand the constraints and limits within which its mass-mediated texts were produced. Based on the above-performed analyses, a number of key findings can be listed. Though Muslim News Online was expected to decode the official discourses of Britishness and community cohesion and then re-encode them according to its respective ideological and cultural contexts, it contained diverse readings. Thus, Muslim News Online did not do that appositionally. Along with Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding Model (Reception Theory) Muslim News Online is reading official discourses in a negoziational way. However, such diversity of readings is performed within hegemonic frameworks. Such frameworks are governed by the taken-for-granted ideological and socio-cultural parameters of Muslim News Online. Muslim News Online tends to be apologetic. Considerably, there is a striking absence of a direct reference to the concepts of Britishness and community cohesion. The dominant discourse is rather one that attempts to decipher and churn out the causes, processes and outcomes of racial discrimination and racism. When issues of identity are raised, a
negociational tone is obvious. Thus, the socio-cultural positions of Muslims in particular and ethnic minorities in general influence their respective media. Muslim News Online does not escalate and does not use inflammatory discourses. There seems to be a strategy of avoidance of tricky and sensitive issues of identity and social cohesion. In fact, no absolute or pure oppositional readings are identified.

There is a crucial distinction that has to be made while discussing discourse representations; a distinction between discourses attributed to other voices in the analyzed articles and discourses of the article itself. Studying and contrasting those two types of discourses (what Fairclough calls ‘attributed’ and ‘unattributed’ discourses) (Fairclough, 1994) reveals the fact that both discourses share certain common ideological orientations as they emanate almost from the same official and political configurations. The British official discourses of Britishness and community cohesion feed discursively Muslim News Online in its discursive formations. Thus, it is suggested that media can use the official discourses but those very official discourses tailor their statements in order to fit with favored media discourses (Fairclough, 1994). Moreover, media is engaged into a process of representation of official discourses which is basically an activity of re-contextualization. Such re-contextualization yields new discursive configurations which can highlight other aspects of original discourses. In a way, re-contextualization offers new insights into the meaning and reading of Britishness and community cohesion. Re-contextualization is performed through a cluster of strategies such as deletion, addition, substitution, ex-nomination, embedment and rearrangement of elements.

**Endnotes:**

Ray Honeyford was a head teacher in Drummond Middle School in Bradford. In 1984, he wrote in the Conservative paper the *Salisbury Review* articles in which he expressed anti-multicultural views. He thought that, in education, ethnic minorities should be encouraged to speak English and study British values and culture rather than focusing on other ethnic languages (Urdu) and ‘alien’ traditions. He was faced with mass protest from Bradford’s ethnic minority, which obliged him to retire early.

**About the Author:**

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