MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF ISLAM AND MUSLIMS: THE ROLE OF GEOGRAPHIC PROXIMITY IN 'OTHERING' DISCOURSES

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Abstract

This study investigates the discourse of "othering" in relation to geographic proximity within two leading Western print media outlets: The Wall Street Journal (United States) and The Daily Telegraph (United Kingdom). Focusing on the Escondido Mosque fire in the US and mosque attacks in Birmingham, UK, the research explores how geographic location influences the representation of Muslim communities. Using a qualitative methodology, the study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to news content published within one month of each incident—March 24 to April 24, 2019, for The Wall Street Journal, and March 21 to April 21, 2019, for The Daily Telegraph. Findings indicate that The Wall Street Journal portrays Islam in a harsher and more prejudiced manner, often minimizing anti-Muslim actions and employing less critical language toward perpetrators, maintaining a uniform framing irrespective of geographic proximity. In contrast, The Daily Telegraph exhibits a nuanced differentiation among groups within the Muslim identity, with coverage patterns shaped by geographic closeness and spatial positioning relative to the newspaper's operational base.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have demonstrated that media exerts both positive and negative influences on society. It addresses a wide range of issues—politics, culture, religion—and provides access to global events that would otherwise remain distant and inaccessible. As Razzaq (2010) notes, with advancements in technology and the emergence of diverse platforms, including the internet, media has become a central force in shaping modern narratives. Similarly, Severin (2000) emphasizes that media content is shaped by broader social, cultural, political, and economic trends. Historically, media research largely focused on quantitative content analysis, but over time, motivated by societal changes, attention shifted toward examining the discourses and language used within media texts (Donald, 2005).

Mass media has long played an essential role in creating, reproducing, and disseminating ideologies and cultural knowledge (Gitlin, 1980; Hall, 1990; Poole, 2002). News media, in particular, is instrumental in sustaining discourses that influence how individuals view themselves and the world around them. These narratives help construct a social environment that validates certain political and cultural perspectives (Creutz-Kamppi, 2008). Hall (1992a) defines discourse as a series of connected statements that produce a specific understanding of a topic, each interacting with others to form a wider contextual framework.

The tension between the West and Islam has deep historical roots. The Western gaze often frames Islam through a lens of superiority and bias, with international media frequently associating Muslim individuals with violence or terrorism, thereby reinforcing preconceived notions (Nurullah, 2010). Although some scholars reject linking Islam to specific geographic constructs such as "the West," the relationship between Islam and Western societies has remained central for decades. Islam and Muslims received heightened visibility in Western media following major events such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 1991 Gulf War, often portrayed in negative, violent, and traumatic frames (Rane, 2008; Said, 1997).

For many in Western societies—where Muslims are minorities—direct interaction with Muslim communities is limited. Consequently, mediated portrayals often become the dominant source of knowledge (Said, 1997). The rapid growth of Islam globally has made it a target of religious and racial discrimination, with Western ideologies viewing it as a political, cultural, and religious challenge (Iqbal, 2010). Historical episodes such as the Crusades have deepened the "us versus them" narrative. Allen (2010) observes that Islamophobia lacks a universally accepted definition due to varied perceptions, but it frequently manifests as the exclusion of Muslims from social and cultural belonging.

Since 9/11, Muslims have been portrayed as a controversial group at the center of political and academic debates (Alharbi, 2017). Studies examining media discourses on Islam and Muslims have adopted diverse theoretical and methodological approaches. Among these, the concept of geographic proximity—the physical closeness of an event to an audience—remains underexplored in relation to 'othering' discourses. Proximity can be geographic, social, psychological, or ideological, but geographically closer events often receive greater emphasis in news coverage (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2005).

This study addresses this gap by examining two incidents: the March 21, 2019 Mosque attacks in Birmingham, UK, where windows of five mosques were smashed with a sledgehammer (Swerling, 2019), and the March 24, 2019 arson attack on the Escondido Islamic Center in California, US, in which graffiti referencing the Christchurch attack was found (Hauser, 2019). Both incidents occurred shortly after the Christchurch attacks, amplifying global fears among Muslim communities.

The portrayal of Muslims in Western media has been a recurring subject in media studies, postcolonial theory, and discourse analysis. Representations are rarely neutral; as Hall (1997) notes, representation is an active process shaping meaning and identity. 'Othering' serves as a mechanism through which dominant groups define themselves in opposition to marginalized groups (Spivak, 1985). Said's *Orientalism* (1978/2003) highlights how the Islamic world has been constructed as irrational, backward, and threatening. Hall (1997) further explains that stereotypes simplify complexity, confining identities within fixed categories and serving ideological purposes by naturalizing social differences.

Ottosen (1995) applies Schmitt's "friend–enemy" distinction to media, arguing that "us versus them" dynamics are often politically constructed, with markers such as race and religion used to enforce exclusion. This extends beyond framing Muslims as foreign to portraying them as ideologically incompatible and dangerous. Van Dijk's "ideological square" (Izadi & Saghaye-Biria, 2007) reinforces such binaries by emphasizing "our good" and "their bad" while minimizing "our bad" and "their good," embedding 'othering' structurally in discourse (Behnam & Moshtaghi Zenouz, 2008).

Research consistently shows that such portrayals reduce Muslim identities to a set of fixed assumptions, marginalizing diversity and shaping policy and public opinion (Jahedi, Abdullah, & Mukundan, 2014; Manan, 2008). Within the Australian context, Ghauri, Yousaf, and Iqbal (2017) found notable differences in how Islam is represented domestically versus internationally, with "foreign Islam" often depicted as a greater threat. Similarly, Ghauri, Umber, and Haq (2021) documented systematic post-9/11 misrepresentations that relied on Orientalist and ideological frameworks, casting Islam as inherently violent and resistant to modernity.

Cesari (2010) characterizes this shift as the "securitization of Islam," whereby Islam is framed

not merely as a religion but as a matter of public order and national security. Tsagarousianou (2016) further argues that terms like "terrorism" and "jihad" have become proxies for Islam, transforming Muslims into conditional members of society whose belonging is perpetually under scrutiny.

In light of this literature, the present study investigates how geographic proximity influences the 'othering' discourse in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Daily Telegraph*, asking "How does geographic proximity influence the 'Othering' discourse in The Wall Street Journal's and The Daily Telegraph's coverage of Islam and Muslims?".

Research question

RQ1: How does geographic proximity influence the 'Othering' discourse in *The Wall Street Journal's* and *The Daily Telegraph's* coverage of Islam and Muslims?

Research Methodology

We have employed Critical Discourse Analysis technique to examine the 'Othering' discourse surrounding Islam and Muslims in international media. Critical discourse analysis, in general, investigates language used beyond the sentence level, and seeing them as irreducible elements in the (re)production of society via semiosis (van Dijk, 1995a). Media text has been analyzed using the same technique to study the trends/ patterns in communication and also to identify the intent of writers for using particular text. To evaluate and determine the trend or pattern of representation of Islam and Muslims CDA deemed appropriate.

Data Analysis

As part of the CDA approach, van Dijk's (1998b) 'ideological square' and 'lexicalization' serves as tools for data interpretation in this study.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (hereinafter referred to as CDA) explores language use beyond isolated sentences, incorporating other semiotic modes such as images and sounds, viewing them as integral to how society is constructed and maintained through the creation of meaning. CDA seeks to expose and challenge how discourse contributes to the reproduction of unequal and exclusionary social structures. It critically engages with the social contexts that these discourses emerge from and are embedded in. In this framework, discourse is understood as being in a reciprocal relationship with semiotic practices and material institutions, where one is influencing and being shaped by the other and vice versa (Wodak, 2015)

CDA as a process is involved in the evaluative process of linguistics as it is practiced by the media. As a methodology, it is crucial in interpreting and analyzing the allocation of meaning to specific linguistic terms. The actual objective of CDA is to examine both visible and hidden structural relations to power, control, discrimination and dominance, particularly in the way that they are expressed through language (Wodak, 1995). CDA focuses on authentic and often extended examples of social interaction that are, at least in part, realized through linguistic means. What distinguishes this critical approach is its dual focus. First, it focuses on the interplay between language and broader social structures. Second, it also focuses on the connection between the act of analysis and the social contexts and practices that it seeks to critique (Wodak, 1995). The essential thesis at the heart of the practice of CDA is that discourse is socially constitutive and socially conditioned and that discourse is an 'opaque' object of power in modern society that CDA undertakes to make visible and transparent (Ghauri, 2019; Ghauri, 2018).

CDA explores how language reflects power, ideology and dominance in society (Matu & Lubbe, 2007, p.404). As Fowler (1991) explains, language shapes reality and news tests must be critically read because they are written from an ideological standpoint (Fowler, 1991 also cited in Shojaei, 2013). Journalists' beliefs may not be stated directly but they are often revealed through subtle language choices (Kuo & Nakuamura, 2005, p. 395). CDA helps uncover these hidden meanings and encourage readers to question how media shape public understanding rather than accepting texts as neutral or objective discourse (Ghauri & Umber, 2019; Shojaei, 2013, p. 860).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach examines how news discourse constructs or

challenges structures of power and ideology, particularly in relation to representation of Muslims and Islam. As notes by scholars such as Candlin (2017), Machin and Mayr (2012), van Dijk (2013), van Leeuwen (2008) and Wodak (2009) and Meyer (2015), CDA is not a unified method. It is a broad, interdisciplinary approach that must be tailored to the specific social and political issues under investigation. Following van Dijk (2013), this research treats CDA as a framework for asking critical and reflexive questions about the discourse and not as a fixed tool. Accordingly, this analysis focuses on three core concepts centers to CDA which are critique, which seeks to expose and question dominant narratives; ideology, which explores implicit beliefs embedded in language and power, which investigates how discourse maintains or challenges social hierarchies and relations of domination (Wodak & Meyer, 2015)

CDA adopts an issue focused approach with an explicitly critical perspective in the examination of both text and spoken communication. It engages with discourse on multiple levels, including grammatical elements such as phonology, syntax and semantics, as well as stylistic choices, rhetorical structures, speech acts, pragmatic strategies and patterns of interaction (Van Dijk, 1995).

Van Dijk (2006) has used twenty-four attributes in CDA to analyze the discourses. In this study following attributes within CDA will be applied; actor description, categorization, comparison, disclaimers, implications, Irony, example/illustrations, metaphor, polarization, number game, national self-glorification, negative 'other' representation, positive self-presentation, norm-expression, populism and pre-supposition.

Ideological Square

In Critical Discourse Analysis, ideology refers to the shared systems of belief that influence how social groups are represented and understood through language. These ideologies are embedded in discourse and are shaped over time through repeated exposure in everyday communication, particularly in institutional settings such as the media (van Dijk, 2000b). Rather than operating explicitly, ideologies often function subtly through patterns of language,

framing and selection, gradually shaping social knowledge and reinforcing dominant worldviews (van Dijk, 2006).

A key function of ideology, as van Dijk (2006) explains, is the construction of group identity through the polarization of 'us' versus 'them'. Media discourse frequently promotes positive self-presentation of in-groups, such as Western nations, institutions or political actors, while engaging in the presentation of the out-groups as the negative 'other', especially those who are perceived as politically different, such as Muslims, immigrants or racialized communities. This kind of binary framing contributes to the social reproduction of inequality by presenting dominant groups as rational and moral, while depicting others as threatening, backwards or deviant (van Dijk, 1998a)

These discursive contrasts are often implicit, and they are shaped by lexical choices, selective reporting and narrative emphasis. Journalistic language may appear neutral, yet it often carries ideological assumptions that favor dominant perspectives. As Kuo and Nakamura (2005) argue, these assumptions are embedded in linguistic forms that require critical analysis to be fully understood. Consequently, media discourse plays an important role in legitimizing certain interpretations of reality while marginalizing others (Kuo & Nakamura, 2005, p.395).

To critically examine these patterns, this study employs van Dijk's (1998b) model of the ideological square. This framework outlines how discourses reinforce group-based bias through strategies such as highlighting or downplaying certain traits depending on the group being discussed (Philo, 2007). These oppositional strategies are often embedded in lexical choices, framing and selective emphasis. As Shojaei (2013) note, the ideological square offers a valuable analytical tool for identifying how media texts produce dominant representations of social groups especially in the politically sensitive contexts.

Lexicalization

In this study, particular attention is given to how lexical choices reveal ideological positioning in the reporting of Muslims and Muslim-related issues in *the Telegraph* and *the Wall Street Journal*. As Shojaei et al. (2013) explains, ideological polarization in

discourse can be uncovered through lexical strategies that rely on positive or negative evaluation (Shojaei et, al., 2013). This strategy of creating binary opposition is used to shape favourable representation of one group while casting another group in a negative light. This is a key element of van Dijk's (1998b) 'ideological square' and 'lexicalization'.

Van Dijk (1998b) identifies the analysis of lexical items (p.31) as one of the most prominent methods in ideological and linguistic studies. He notes the words are often used not only factually, but also evaluatively, carrying out judgments' or opinions, either generally or in context. This makes the choice of vocabulary a significant site for identifying ideological bias in news discourse.

Furthermore, lexicalization also refers to the referential strategies used to name people, groups or issues. As Van Dijk (1995b) explains, these choices depend on factors such as the genre of discourse, the speaker's intention or mood, the social setting and the cultural norms that inform the speaker's values. For example, the right-wing political discourse around Muslim immigrants may use negatively loaded terms to portray them as economic burdens or cultural threats (Hafez, 2015).

So, keeping in view the relevance and suitability, the "ideological square" and "lexicalization" have been used in the present study to analyze how *the Telegraph* and *the Wall Street Journal* report on Muslims, Islam and related geopolitical events. By tracing instances of both positive self-presentation and negative 'othering', the analysis reveals how ideological patters manifest in mainstream reporting and how discourse serves to reinforce existing power hierarchies through seemingly objective journalistic practices.

Population and Sampling

The population understudy in this paper is all types of news stories related to the selected events published in *The Telegraph* and *The Wall Street Journal* selected for critical and non-critical times for the selected events

To evaluate 'othering' based on geographic proximity, *The Telegraph* which is a UK based newspaper; 'Othering' discourse has been analyzed for the anti-Muslim hate crimes in UK after the Christchurch attack where five mosques' windows

were smashed in Birmingham in single day on March 21, 2019. Time duration selected for this study is from March 21, 2019 till April 21, 2019. For *The Wall Street Journal* which is US based newspaper, *Escondido Mosque* fire incident which occurred on March 24, 2019 is analyzed. Time duration selected is from March 24, 2019 till April 24, 2019. The non-probability sampling method is deemed appropriate and is employed for this study. The research is carried out with a purpose and for a specific time period to find out news in selected news stories. As two newspapers are selected for the study, therefore census sampling technique is applied.

Data Collection and Sampling

The entire news story is taken as a unit of analysis. Data was collected from 'LexisNexis' using the terms 'Islam' and/or 'Muslims' as key words during the time periods under study.

The time duration in relation to geographic proximity for *The Wall Street Journal* was from March 24, 2019 to April 24, 2019. The keywords 'Islam' and/or 'Muslims' in this time duration showed 19 items in *The Wall Street Journal*. The results included opinions, editorials, features and news items. By using "Census sampling", that is, going carefully through each and every item, 11 news stories were selected in *The Wall Street Journal*. "Data cleansing" was the next step followed by the researcher in which the exceptionally appropriate news stories from the selected news stories were chosen. After careful reading 3 news stories were selected in *The Wall Street Journal.*

The time duration in relation to geographic proximity for *The Daily Telegraph* was from March 21, 2019 to April 21, 2019. The keywords 'Islam' and/or 'Muslims' in this time duration showed 30 items in *The Daily Telegraph*. The results included opinions, editorials, features and news items. By using "Census sampling", that is, going carefully through each and every item, 8 news stories were selected in *The Daily Telegraph*. "Data cleansing" was the next step followed by the researcher in which the exceptionally appropriate news stories from the selected news stories were chosen. After careful reading 3 news stories were selected in *The Daily Telegraph.* 'Systematic sampling' technique was not applied in

the time duration selected according to geographic proximity as the number of news stories were same in both the newspapers.

Analysis

The Wall Street Journal has analogous coverage for the news which falls in its geographic proximity and those incidents which are not within its geographic proximity. The stance of the newspaper remained critical and conservative for Islam and Muslims and news where the culprits are anti- Muslims, or in other words, 'Islamophobic' incidents, 'our' bad has been de-emphasized and news is presented in indulgent way.

The Wall Street Journal in the news entitled; "ISIS claimed....... Bombings", published on April 24, 2019, has explicitly used critical themes and terminologies against Islam and Muslims. The terms used in this news stories are; *Islamic State, claimed, responsibility, bombings, killed, more than 300 people, suicide, bombers, loyalty, to, group, Islamic State fighters, ISIS, SITE, firm, tracks, militant organizations, confirmed, suicide bombings, Islamic State militants, it would be, among, deadliest, attacks, attributed, to group, outside, Iraq, Islamic State.*

Another news entitled; "China defends the Razing........Muslim areas", published on April 11, 2019, the continuous pattern of 'othering' Muslims by the newspaper can be observed. The news focused on the fact that bulldozing of Muslim minority Uighur's neighborhood is a step towards improved security and lifestyle. The newspaper has supportive stance for government's stance against Muslim minority. The terminologies used by the newspaper were;

Urumqi's, neighborhood, Uighur's, new controls, government's campaign redevelopment, led to, bulldozing, neighborhoods, housing, Uighur migrants, mainstays, Uighur life justified, installation, digital cameras, at, Urumqi's, more than, 300 mosques, by evoking, last months, mass shootings, New Zealand, killings, were, reminder, more security, at, religious venues (The Wall Street Journal, April 11, 2019)

The major news which falls in the geographic proximity of the newspaper entitled; "Grafiti citing New Zealand....... mosque fire in California",

published on March 25, 2019. The newspaper had biased stance towards the coverage of the news. The newspaper had showed clemency for the individuals who are anti-Muslim or anti-Islam. *The Wall Street Journal* has not showed any harsh stance for the ones who were suspected in this 'Islamophobic' incident. The themes used by the newspaper were;

someone, noticed, fire, someone, rushed, to, the flames, using, outside wall, was, scorched, but, not badly damaged, no one, injured, anti-Muslim graffiti, referring, to, New Zealand, there, were, no, suspects, investigators, were, examining, video surveillance, from, anywhere, the fire, was, investigated, as, arson, and, a hate crime. (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2019)

Overall, in *The Wall Street Journal*, it is observed that spatial and geographical proximity to the newspaper's primary operational domain does not exert any discernible influence in the characterization of Islam and Muslims. This phenomenon may stem from the newspaper's perception of Muslim identity as the pre dominant characteristic, leading to the exclusion of other intersectional identity markers.

The news which did not fall in the geographical proximity of *The Daily Telegraph* entitled; "Muslim congress woman.......won't stay silent", published on April 15, 2019, negative and critical themes for Muslims are evident.

America's first, Muslim, congresswomen, vowed, not, be, silenced, American-Islamic Relations, Mr. Trump, "we will never forget", interspersed, with, IIhan's Omar, Muslim rhetoric, inciting racial, hatred, Nancy Pelosi, senior, Democrat, notably, measured, her response, chastising, new congresswoman, memory, 9/11, sacred, ground, any, discussion, must be, done, with, reverence (*The Daily Telegraph*, April 15, 2019)

The news which falls in the geographical proximity of the newspaper entitled; "anti-Muslim obsession.......... blow up mosque", published on April 9, 2019. The newspaper has not used critical themes for Islam and Muslims, rather the emphasis is on 'our' good. This is contrary to its coverage otherwise. The prominent themes used by *The Daily Telegraph* are; *Anti-Islamic, terrorist, admitted, planning, blow up, mosque, counter-terror, police, admitted,*

prosecuting, Bishop, was, dangerous, unpredictable, man, who, has, violent, obsession.

The Daily Telegraph as compared to *The Wall Street Journal* shows apparent pattern of discrimination among various groups within the broader Muslim identity, influenced by their geographical proximity and spatial positioning relative to the newspaper's operational base. Proximity to the newspaper's location correlates with a higher likelihood of the newspaper adopting a more tolerant stance. The presence of counter discourse at the later parts of the news story shows the stance of Muslim community. Thus, the newspaper has given space and importance to opinion of Muslim community in relevance to attack on mosques, which was missing in case of *The Wall Street journal.*

Conclusion

This study highlights the nuanced yet significant role that geographic proximity plays in shaping the discourse of 'Othering' within Western media narratives. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis of *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Daily Telegraph* coverage of mosque attacks in Escondido and Birmingham, it becomes evident that both newspapers engage in 'Othering'—albeit via distinct mechanisms.

Regardless of geographic closeness, *The Wall Street Journal* consistently presents a biased portrayal of Islam and Muslims, frequently minimizing the severity of anti-Muslim violence. This uniformity suggests an entrenched narrative framework that normalizes Islamophobic undertones irrespective of incident location.

In contrast, *The Daily Telegraph*'s discourse reflects a spatially influenced form of 'Othering,' wherein the representation of Muslim communities varies according to their proximity to the UK. The newspaper's selective differentiation among Muslim groups reveals a localized bias that constructs certain Muslim identities as more threatening based on geographic closeness and perceived levels of integration.

Overall, the findings underscore that, despite differing approaches, both newspapers contribute to the marginalization of Muslim communities—either through homogenized vilification or selective spatial

discrimination. This reinforces the imperative to critically interrogate media discourses for their role in shaping public perceptions and sociopolitical narratives.

At the outset, this study posed the research question: *How does geographic proximity affect the 'Othering' discourse in* The Wall Street Journal *and* The Daily Telegraph *coverage of Islam and Muslims?* Employing the theoretical lenses of the ideological square and lexicalization within Critical Discourse Analysis, the study finds that *The Daily Telegraph*, unlike *The Wall Street Journal*, exhibits a discernible pattern of discrimination among Muslim subgroups influenced by their geographic and spatial positioning relative to the newspaper's operational base. Notably, proximity to the newspaper correlates with a comparatively more tolerant stance, suggesting that *The Daily Telegraph* incorporates intersectional markers such as geographic closeness, thereby mitigating an exclusive focus on Muslim identity in its portrayals.

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