

# **Representations of Islam in the British press 1998 - 2009**

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**CASS**

Corpus Approaches  
to Social Science

CASS: Briefings

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## About CASS...

The ESRC funded Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) is a research centre based at Lancaster University which aims to bring the methods and benefits of the corpus approach to other disciplines.

## From the Centre Director

The corpus approach harnesses the power of computers to allow analysts to work to produce machine aided analyses of large bodies of language data - so-called *corpora*. Computers allow us to do this on a scale and with a depth that would typically defy analysis by hand and eye alone.

In doing so, we gain unprecedented insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. The centre's work is generating such insights into a range of important social issues like climate change, hate crime and education. This series of briefings aims to spread the social impact and benefits of the work being done by the centre and, in so doing, encourage others to use our methods in future.

**Prof. Tony McEnery**

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# Introduction

## Why Investigate?

After 9/11, Europe witnessed a steady growth of anti-Muslim sentiment which many right wing groups have capitalised on in order to gain support. Certain representations of Islam and Muslims in the British national press also call into question whether Islamophobia has become an acceptable form of prejudice. In order to investigate, a corpus of 200,000 newspaper articles from the British press was created to focus on the ways in which Islam and Muslims are represented.

## Key Research Questions

- Is the British press Islamophobic?
- How are Islam and Muslims typically written about?
- Have representations of Islam and Muslims changed over time, particularly since 9/11?
- Are some newspapers less 'friendly' towards Muslims than others?



200,000 articles containing the words *Muslim(s)*, *Islam*, *Islamic*, *Islamist*, and *Islamist* were collected together into a corpus of almost 143 million words. All of the articles were published between 1998 and 2009 and came from the following British papers:

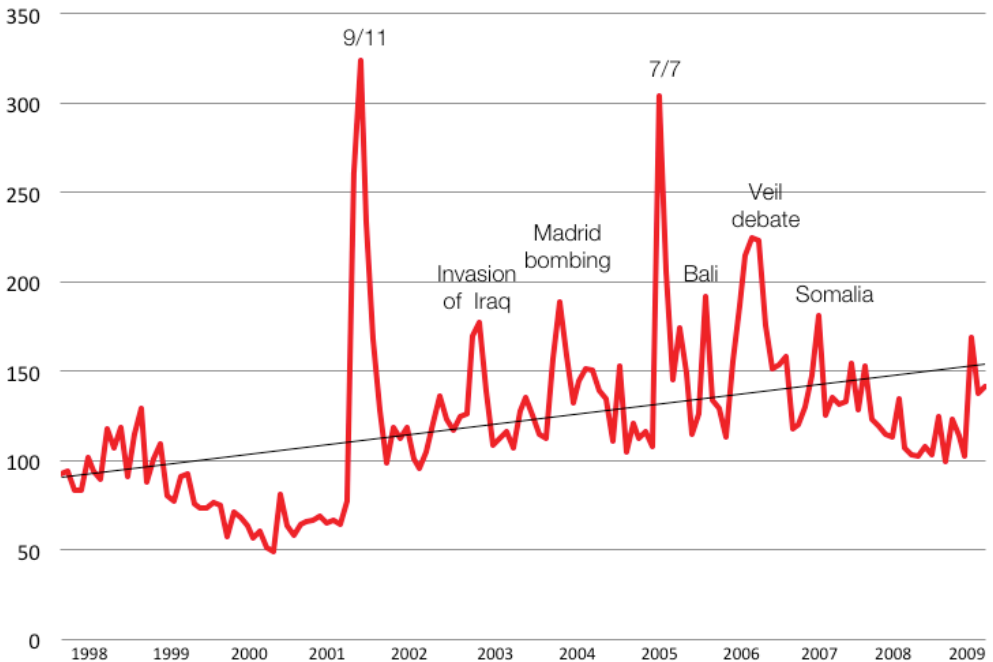
Tabloid	Broadsheet
The People	The Daily Telegraph
The Star	The Times
The Sun	The Independent
The Express	The Observer
The Mirror	The Guardian
The Daily Mail	

Given such a large data set, Corpus Linguistics provides an ideal methodological approach, especially for 'corpus-driven' investigations such as this where we began with no hypothesis about what was happening in the data. Corpus Linguistics facilitated quantitative investigations whereby computational tools are used to analyse common and statistically salient language patterns, but also enabled qualitative language analyses. In what follows, this report details some of the main findings from a study employing a range of qualitative and quantitative analyses.

# Findings

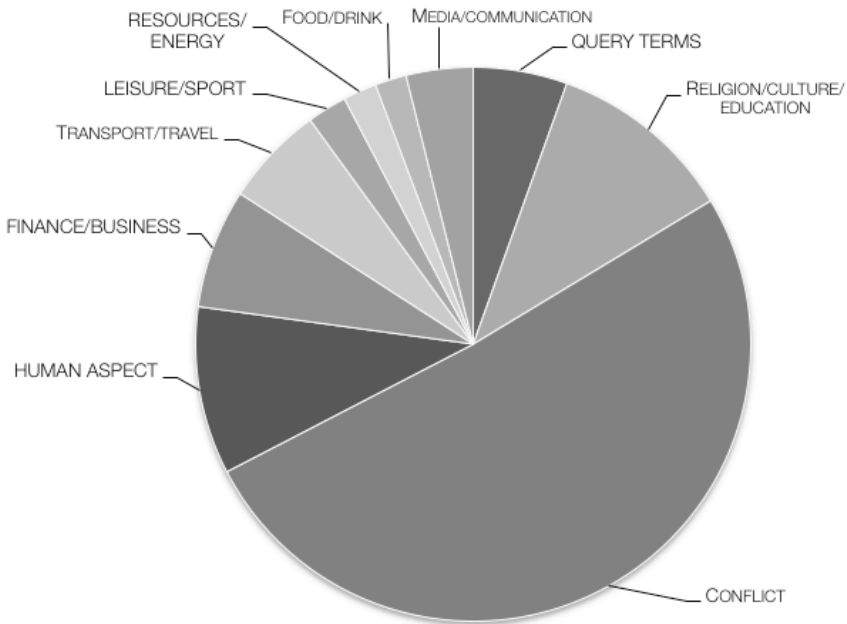
## The 9/11 Effect

The chart below shows the average number of articles written about Muslims per month in the corpus. As can be seen, the number of articles peaked at the time of 9/11 and also during 7/7. Overall, there was a slow trend upwards in terms of press interest in Islam.



**Figure 1. Average number of articles per month**

In all of the articles collected to create the corpus, words relating to **terrorism** (*terror, terrorist, terrorists, terrorism*) were actually more frequent than words relating to **Islam** (*Islam, Islamic, Islamist, Islamists*). Considering that words relating to Islam were specified as something that the articles collected for the corpus must contain, it is curious that words relating to terrorism which were not part of the collection process were more frequent.

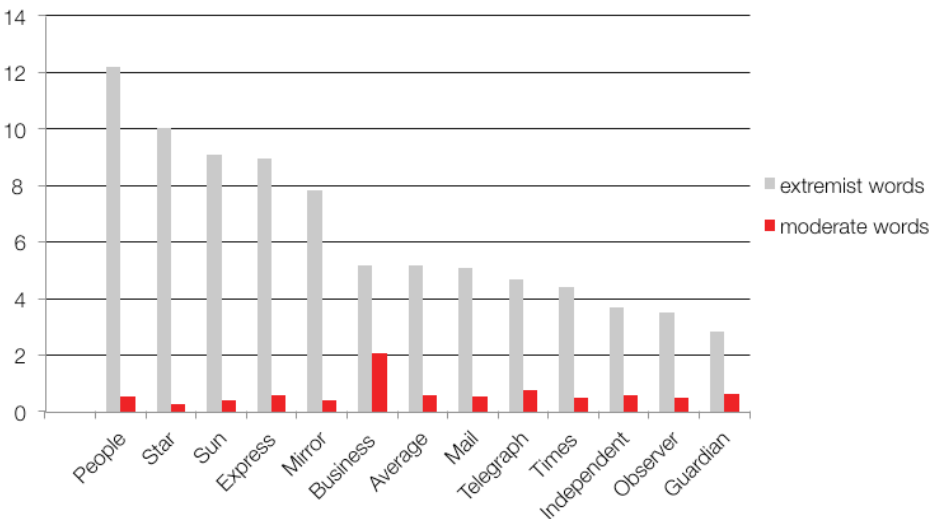


It was found that about half of the **topic** words in the newspaper articles referred to the concept of conflict.

1. **The Daily Mail** was the only newspaper to use the term *Moslem* instead of *Muslim* for a year after the Muslim Council asked it to drop the spelling in 2002. The spelling of *Moslem* is similar to the Arabic word for *oppressor*
2. **The Daily Express**, more than other papers, focussed on stories about immigration and Sharia law introduction in Britain
3. **The Daily Star** printed readers' text messages which made inaccurate statements, e.g. *'all our money goes on asylum & mosques. Samwigan'* (16/05/05)
4. **The Sun** was the most likely of all the papers to refer to the concept of *evil* in its articles about Islam
5. **The Guardian** tended to be most critical of other newspapers for being Islamophobic
6. **The Independent** was the paper that most referred to different branches of Islam such as Sunni and Shia
7. **The Times** and **The Daily Telegraph** appear to have been influenced by tabloid reporting of hate preachers on benefits and changed their reporting style accordingly

About 1 in 20 references to *Muslims* occurred next to a word referring to extremist belief such as *fanatic* or *militant*. The word *Islamic* occurred next to these words 1 time in every 6. *Muslims* were described as *moderate* only about 1 times in every 200.

The chart below shows the percentage of times that the word *Muslim* or *Muslims* occurred next to a word describing extremism or moderation.



In the British press, *Muslims* and *Islam* are more likely to be associated with extremism than moderation.

However, a term like *moderate Muslim* could imply that many Muslims are *not* moderate. The term *Muslim moderate* might be better. Yet *moderate Muslim* occurred about 11 times more frequently than *Muslim moderates*.

The term *devout Muslim* was sometimes used by the press to suggest someone who has strong beliefs but is not extreme. However, devout Muslims were regularly implied to not to be as devout as they appear:

In the meantime, although he was a devout Muslim, Major Hasan was a regular visitor to a Texas strip club, where he would sip beer while enjoying \$50 (£30) lap dances

*(The Times, 21 October 2009)*

In other cases, being devout was strongly implied to be opposite of “normal”:

He was a devout Muslim, but he was a normal kid who loved Manchester United and played football and cricket. He was brilliant and could have played for England, but he started to lose interest when he got involved with these extremists

*(The Mirror, 1 April 2004)*

## Muslim leaders

*Muslim leaders* were often written about negatively. They were viewed as ‘self-styled’ or ‘so-called’, benefitting from their position and having too many opinions and demands. In particular, they were often seen as **offended, angry, outraged, hostile** and **indignant**. Yet they were also criticised for not condemning certain things. So they are either seen as too angry or not angry enough.

The word *Muslim* occurred most often before *community*. Most articles referred to “the Muslim community” as if it is a single entity across all of Britain. Many conservative newspapers referred to “the Muslim community” as easily offended and receiving “special treatment” from councils and the government:

...the ridiculous decision by a Government  
quango who rejected a story based on the  
Three Little Pigs classic in case it offended the  
Muslim community

(*The Sun*, 31 January 2008)

The second most common word occurring after *Muslim* was *world*. As with *community*, *Muslim world* groups all Muslims together and was frequently used to indicate opposition to ‘the west’. Examples of these are shown in the table of collocations below:

damage” to relations between the	Muslim world and the west	, Mr Sacranie added.
bridges between a bitterly resentful	Muslim world and the West	; between an anti-American
such heightened unease between the	Muslim world and the West	, and when many Turks are
city’s bid to build bridges between the	Muslim world and the West	. He said ‘A unique
help to heal the divisions between the	Muslim world and the West	. He asked ‘Is it really going
increase in tension between the	Muslim world and the West	. There would also be the
deepened the alienation between the	Muslim world and the West	- with consequences not
It will define relations between the	Muslim world and the West	.” Turning to the
better understanding between the	Muslim world and the West	. In Cambridge, the HRH

The term *Muslim women* was generally more frequent than *Muslim men*. When Muslim women were talked about, it was most frequently in reference to debate on whether they should wear the veil. The debate reached its peak in the UK in 2006 after Jack Straw published an article in his local newspaper asking women not to wear the veil.

The term *veil* can refer to the *burqa*, *niqab*, or *jilbab*, but was sometimes left unclear:

A film called *Bombay* drew fire for not using the city's local name, Mumbai, and for showing a Hindu boy flirting with a girl in a burqa (veil)

(*The Times*, 28 May 1998)

And women sin when they wear make-up outside the house and "tight trousers with a hijab (veil)

(*The Daily Mirror*, 07 February 2005)

There also appeared to be a **liberal dilemma** for newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The Independent* when talking about the veil. Although they did not want to appear to condemn Islam, they had trouble condoning the veil as it was seen to oppose equal rights for women. Their stance was therefore sometimes confusing.

Conservative newspapers were more forthcoming in condemning the veil, particularly associating the veil with a discourse of *horror*.



## Examples of condemnation of the veil include:

'...we wasted thousands in legal aid on silly little misguided Muslim girls to take schools to court for the right to dress like a Dalek in a full veil',

Jon Gaunt

*(The Sun, 20 June 2008)*

'How long before non-Muslim women are compelled to dress like bats to enter certain parts of certain British cities?', Peter Hitchens

*(The Mail on Sunday, 16 July 2006)*

'We let shroud-swishing zombies flout OUR standards of freedom and tolerance every day', Julie Burchill

*(The Sun, 24 June 2009)*

## The 3 most commonly cited arguments against wearing the veil were:

- It oppresses women
- It makes community relations difficult
- It is a form of extremism

## Conclusion

Overall, the representations of Muslims we found in the British press ranged from those that were intended to be antagonistic to more subtle, possibly unconscious practices which constructed Muslims as similar to each other and different from 'westerners', engaged in conflict or likely to hold extremist views. While we acknowledge that newspapers are likely to write more about conflict, when we compared our corpus against a similar one containing general news stories, we found significantly more reference to conflict in stories about Muslims.

## Following the findings, we make the following “good practice recommendations:

- Allow more space to quote and reflect the views of “ordinary” Muslims
- Acknowledge different branches of Islam rather than constructing Islam as a single religion, particularly as different from and in conflict with ‘The West’
- Consider the cumulative impact of associating Islam with terror, extremism and conflict and attempt more balanced reporting with coverage of a wider range of contexts (culture, education, business, leisure, human interest stories, travel)
- Consider more carefully whether the religious orientation of people in stories is actually relevant to the reporting
- Avoid publishing letters or opinion pieces which are deliberately aimed to be offensive or misleading

## More about this project

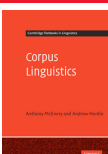


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## CASS Staff books



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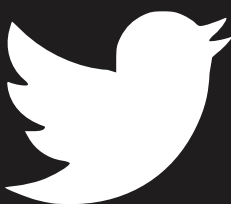
Part of our aim at CASS is to make Corpus Linguistics accessible, which is why we have created our **free online FutureLearn course**. With the course, we aim to demonstrate that corpus approaches can offer researchers from all disciplines unique, valuable insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. We provide all you need to start 'doing' Corpus Linguistics yourself.

This briefing should act as an introduction and companion to the course where you will begin to apply the concepts and methods mentioned here in a practical way relevant to your field of interest.

**The course is free, can be done from home, and comes with a whole range of content and support from world-leading scholars in the field of Corpus Linguistics. For more, visit:**

**[futurelearn.com/courses/corpus-linguistics](https://futurelearn.com/courses/corpus-linguistics)**

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**CASS: Briefings** is a series of short, quick reads on the work being done at the ESRC/CASS research centre at Lancaster University, UK. Commissioning work from internationally recognised academics in the field of Corpus Linguistics, *CASS: Briefings* set out to make cutting edge research easily accessible, providing a good introduction to the variety of vital and exciting research going on in the area of Corpus Linguistics.

