

Islamophobia, 'Brownface' and media controversies: An analysis of newspaper media responses to Channel 4's 'My Week as a Muslim'.

Programme Overview

My Week as a Muslim aired on Channel 4 on the 23rd October 2017 with the intention of raising awareness of Islamophobia in the UK. In the programme a white British woman used prosthetics to transform her appearance on a visit to Manchester's Pakistani Muslim community as the city deals with the aftermath of the recent Manchester bombing attack. Despite the producer emphasising the programme was to raise awareness, the execution led to some criticisms. The use of prosthetics and 'browning' up to validate a Muslim's experience caused widespread controversy due to its racist undertones and the historical problem of 'Brownface'.

Islamophobia in the media

The media, whether that be social or mainstream is influential on audiences and acts as an 'elite' body. The media has the superiority in that it decides who or what gets represented and who and what gets left out. Significantly, following the events of 9/11 the coverage of British Muslims in the press increased dramatically (2000: 352 stories, 2008: 3466 stories) with substantial links being made between terrorism, religious issues and Muslim extremism. The widespread and continued negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media has led to this 'fear' and creation of 'suspect communities' to which Islamophobia is now widespread across Britain.

Method

- Using the Nexis Database to download newspapers that include 'My Week as a Muslim', dated between October 2017 and September 2019.
- Using Content Analysis to code themes that appear within the newspaper articles.
- Quantify the coded themes so as to draw conclusions about how the media have responded to the programme.
- Themes were established through establishing either 'positive' or 'negative' phrases that the articles made in relation to the programme.

What is Content Analysis?

Content Analysis is a research method that seeks to quantify themes/words into categories that can be analysed. This is achieved through coding the data and then evaluating the established codes. The data is coded using a coding schedule in which all the data is input into the predetermined categories.

Findings

60 newspaper articles were downloaded from Nexis to create this data set:

- 25 articles responded negatively to the programme.
- 11 articles responded positively to the programme, by suggesting the programme has raised awareness
- 32 articles were descriptive and neutral in tone, however some of these still referenced the controversy in relation to the 'browning up'.
- 8 articles were a varied response of both negative and positive aspects and it was difficult to draw a solid conclusion on their viewpoint
- 37 articles criticised the show for the use of 'Brownface'
- 20 articles criticised the show for being racist in its portrayal of the Muslim Community.

Conclusion

Overall, this research has demonstrated that although the show did spark significant controversy, more than half of the media's news articles released about the show were only of descriptive nature and took neither a negative or positive stance. Despite this, there were double the number of articles commenting negatively in comparison to positive. Also, a significant number of the articles referred to the problem of the show using brownface to validate a Muslim's experiences and the racism in this representation.

The Problem of 'Blackface'

'Blackface' developed as a form of entertainment primarily but not exclusively in the USA in the early 19th century, where white performers would portray Black men and women in racist stereotypical, exaggerated and dehumanized ways, supposedly as a form of entertainment. It saw white performers use black make-up, paint or dirt to 'darken up' their face and act often in a dimwitted and buffoonish manner for white audiences. This remained a dominant type of entertainment until the mid-20th century.

In 2017, 'My Week as a Muslim' led to allegations of 'Brownfacing', in that the appearance of a non-Muslim woman was made to fit an exaggerated and stereotypical image of a Pakistani Muslim woman through the use of make-up and prosthetics.

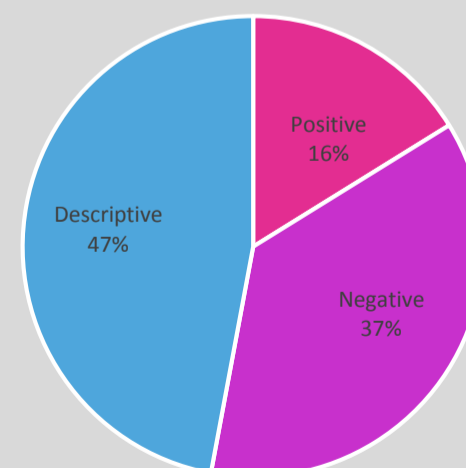
Strengths

- The method is transparent meaning that it can be replicated across time and different researchers
- It is possible to be used over a longitudinal basis
- Unobtrusive in the sense that it does not require participants
- Flexible
- Gives information about groups where it could be otherwise sensitive to obtain

Weaknesses

- The research can only be as good as the data
- Difficult to be 100% objective
- A limited approach. Gives no answer to 'why' something is happening

Emotions Analysis



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