New technologies, continuing ideologies: Online reader comments as a support for media perspectives of minority religions

Tayyiba Bruce

Newman University, Genners Lane, Birmingham B32 3NT, UK

A B S T R A C T

The recent growth of populism has resulted in dramatic political change in British, European and American politics. Given the role of right-wing media in legitimising and encouraging traditionalist, nationalist or sometimes far-right populist discourse, the linguistic and semantic relationship between news and readers' discourse in the context of right-leaning news websites merits investigation in the current climate. This paper examines the relationship in terms of representations of Islam and Catholicism in *Daily Mail* and *Telegraph* websites. Empirical keyword analysis of news articles and linked comments is presented. Key semantic categories revealed evidence for stereotypical representation of these religions, as applicable to new media contexts and enacted in the websites of traditional print media. Results highlighted that long-term themes such as 'Islamic terrorism, war and extreme belief' and 'the Pope, Vatican and scandals in the Catholic Church' continue to dominate news stories online. 18 out of 19 categories in Islam news repeated in comments, and 9 out of 13 in Catholicism news repeated in comments. This strong overlap indicated close connections between news and comments and shared ideologies. Higher numbers of semantic categories in comments showed greater variation of topics than news, with 15 and 23 additional categories in Islam and Catholicism comments respectively. However, key multi-words reflecting collectivisation of communities, such as *Muslim country*, were identified in news and repeated in comments. Investigation of *Muslim country* revealed nationalistic and polarising statements by readers, while investigation of *penitents* revealed portrayal of Catholics as an 'out-group' through lexis which denoted violence, shock and crime. Closer analysis of some keywords revealed polarity between readers displaying differing views in relation to various aspects of religion. Taken together, however, findings suggested that age old stereotypes of minority religions were perpetuated in new media contexts.

Crown Copyright © 2017 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

An array of recent studies provide evidence for hostile coverage of Islam in the British press (e.g. Baker et al., 2013; Taira et al., 2012; Saeed, 2007; Moore et al., 2008). News articles indicate first, Islam and Muslims as a threat and "suspect community" (Nickels et al., 2012) and second, as a cultural 'Other'. The first of these themes stems from stories about violence, terrorism, extremism and criminality as associated with Islamic belief (Baker et al., 2013; Poole, 2002). Muslims have been discursively constructed as a threat to global peace (Baker et al., 2013), and to Britain or British culture (Saeed, 2007). They are portrayed as clashing with British values, such as equality and human rights, which form

the cornerstones of democratic society (Ratcliffe, 2004) and the established British religion, Christianity (Taira et al., 2012). The second theme involves representation of Muslims as foreign, with ill-placed loyalties or as immigrants and asylum seekers (Richardson, 2009), thus presenting unresolvable cultural differences typified by negative characteristics such as barbarism, irrationality, primitivism and sexism (Benn and Jawad, 2004). Many of these studies were post-9/11 representations of Islam but earlier studies also report deviance, violence and mental imbalance as key topics (van Dijk, 1991).

Studies of Catholicism in the media also report the dominance of similar themes. Catholics have been presented as an ongoing threat in British and American media and as antagonistic toward the Church of England (Woolley, 2012). Most recently, this has been centered around child abuse scandals (Pepinster, 2012; Woolley, 2012; Pierre, 2011; Jenkins, 2003). As with Islam, portrayal of Catholicism as a cultural 'Other', or "social pariah"

(Pepinster, 2012:171) has been typical of media coverage recently, leading to accusations of anti-Catholic bias and hostility to the Catholic Church (Royle, 2012; Cozens, 2004; Watts, 2004), with Catholics depicted as intolerant and anti-reason (Woolley, 2012). This tendency can also be identified in British literature and political discourse about Catholicism (O'Malley, 2006; Colley, 2005). Furthermore, association between Catholicism and terrorism was a key theme in news coverage until relatively recently (Nickels et al., 2012). Although some level of positivity and inclusivity in representation was recently identified in BBC, *Times* and *Telegraph* news about Popes and Papal visits to Britain (Taira et al., 2012), this has been explained in terms of the need to portray a more foreign Other, namely Islam, as the enemy (Lund, 2011). Therefore, Otherness may be placed on a gradient by language users rather than an absolute characteristic applied to a particular group.

1.1. Shifts in media and participatory practices

Traditionally, media communication with the public was largely a one-way process, with limited opportunities for readers to respond. For example, letters to the Editor were selected by newspapers to represent the institutional voice and more challenging points of view may not have been published (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002). The 'web 2.0' era changed communication conventions and boundaries in journalism, with the advent and growth of social networking sites, blogs and news websites online, while televised, radio and print news continued offline. For instance, free access to publishing technology brought a dramatic increase in 'citizen' or 'amateur' journalism and a plethora of small news outlets, which provided a 'horizontal' alternative to the tradition vertical (or top-down) structure of media communication and platforms for dissemination of alternative worldviews (Bivens, 2014).

News websites with participatory features for audiences, such as reader comments sections, have become increasingly popular in recent years (Santana, 2014; Milioni et al., 2012; Neuberger and Nuernbergk, 2010). The initial perception of these innovations as a threat to professional journalism (Lewis, 2012) has been debated, with continuation of traditional norms and values cited in recent research (Domingo et al., 2014). Bivens (2014: 205) argues that audience desire for interactivity, transparency and immediacy in televised reporting, are best met by established institutions which can meet the financial investments, such as in satellite technologies, which make live reporting or "breaking news" broadcasts possible. The ability to satisfy audiences in this way, is thought to increase loyalty and trust while the variability of consumption patterns, and audience need for continuity and routine has maintained the place of established or elite journalism (Bivens, 2014). This could mean that traditional production processes, brought about by top-down directives continue, with emphasis on simplification, "human interest", "memorableness", drama and conflict rather than on providing context and history to readers (Bivens, 2014).

Nevertheless, social media technologies, including user-generated content (UGC) have been shown to deviate from these constraints (Bivens, 2014):

> "Many see them as functioning in the opposite direction by confusing, blurring, and outwardly, unapologetically pushing the boundaries of journalism to make room for new models such as amateur and participatory journalism."

UGC is considered by some as peripheral to news production (Karlsson, 2011) and unlikely to bring societal change (Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2009), partially because the potential of tools to understand audiences (such as numbers of likes, shares and comments) is not yet fully being realised by journalists (Bivens, 2014;). However, others describe UGC as fundamental to contemporary journalism, (Manosevitch and Tenenboim, 2017; Batsell, 2015). Reader comments sections, which form the main type of UGC in news websites (Hermida, 2011), allow unprecedented opportunities for readers to express their opinions and beliefs, including religious and political orientations and more private views (Loke, 2012). Most national UK newspapers and many local papers now offer readers this opportunity, free of charge (Collins and Nerlich, 2015) thus empowering citizens in a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006, Leung, 2009). From the journalistic perspective, opportunity to comment generates website traffic and improves brand loyalty (Batsell, 2015). In fact, there is some evidence for UGC as correlated to offline political participation (Kaufhold et al., 2010).

1.2. Reader comments: participation, dialogue or incivility

In research on comments as ratings systems, debates correlated with levels of interest, while increased commenting was considered as success of a given article by journalists (Nagar, 2011; Reich, 2011). Research has examined user comments in terms of linguistic features such as rhetoric, focus and register (Freund, 2011; Galily, 2008; Kohn and Neiger, 2007; Manosevitch and Walker, 2009). According to Gurak, 1997, comments tend to take an oral or casual style and anonymity in such contexts encourages open dialogue between people of all ages and backgrounds, including opportunity to explore self and gender identities. This in turn provides a large amount of data for linguists to explore, for instance in terms of public perceptions of minority religions that would otherwise be difficult to access.

Reader comments may encourage expression of hostile emotions (Gurak, 1997) due to lack of moral restrictions and norms (Virilio,1997). According to Hecht (2004), linguistic aggressions, such as talk-backs, slander and expletives indicate personal protests about social issues and signal tension within the discourse. These have been likened to graffiti in the offline world (Rosenthal, 2004). Santana (2014) revealed causation between anonymity and "incivility" on news websites. Conversely, users who must identify themselves tend to contribute more deliberative comments, with diverse perspectives (Aharona, 2012; Nagar, 2011). Collins and Nerlich (2015) argued that incivility in the form of vulgarity, peroration, name-calling and stereotyping is not as prominent as the demand for rational argumentation. However, other studies highlighted that hard news, controversial issues or high-profile figures with a particular political stance attracted incivility (Coe et al., 2014; Holliman, 2011) more comments (Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011; Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015) and more one-time rather than reciprocal comments, resulting in polarisation rather than two-way debating (Manosevitch and Tenenboim, 2017).

Tenenboim and Cohen's (2015:207) recent study revealed that that the main focus of comments was likely to be politics/government followed by crime, military/defence and society/welfare (such as in hard news topics). They noted that comments can be "extremely blatant", which has occasionally led to comments sections being disabled, for instance in the case of Christian Science Monitor in 2012. The editor of the magazine based his decision on the large numbers of "unproductive comments" posted over a period of two years (see Batsell, 2015). In his work on the British press, Richardson (Richardson, 2009:373-6; Atkin and Richardson, 2007) argued that comments which incite hatred and promote extreme views (e.g. "GET SHOT OF THE LOT OF THEM", "ban Islam") are the responsibility of news institutions because they choose to publish and therefore endorse them; comments sections enable institutions to distance themselves from controversial statements while at the same time circulating them. Ben-