The role of the European media in reproducing and reinforcing stereotypes and negative images of religious and ethnic minorities, particularly Muslims, is well documented. Since the media are the main sources of information about minority communities for majority groups, negative coverage has a potentially huge impact on inter-community relations in a multicultural and multiethnic Europe. While it remains important to challenge and falsify inaccurate and stereotypical media coverage, there is also a need for new forms of reporting that are sensitive to ambiguity and variation, and thereby promote intercultural understanding. The Islamophonic initiative offers an intriguing approach to such challenges.

How can reporting be improved? Do emulation-worthy examples exist? This article argues that in his 1997 book, *Covering Islam*, Edward Said provides valuable insights into Islam and Muslim life that could inform a meaningful reporting on the subject. It then points out one rare instance of reportage where those insights have been put to use—“Islamophonic,” a weekly infotainment podcast started this January by the London-based Guardian group of publications. By analyzing three reporting samples from the podcast, this paper illustrates how a sophisticated and responsible reporting about Islamic issues and Muslims is realized by “Islamophonic.” I conclude by drawing attention to how such reportage could contribute to creating better inter-community relations in a multicultural and multiethnic society like the UK.

Understanding Islam

Edward Said suggests in *Covering Islam* that Islam ought to be viewed at least at three broadly different, yet inter-linked, levels. First comes the Quran itself, the central religious text of the faith. Second is the broad interpretive frameworks: the huge corpus of Quranic commentaries (*tafsir*), the various biographies of the Prophet (sira), the traditions of the Prophet (Hadith) and the various schools of Islamic law. Third, and the most crucial, is the level in “which the various ideologies have been lived, the practices to which they have been linked, practices which certainly influenced them if they did not inspire them.” That is, the realm of the faithful—Muslims. Here the faith exists in its most complex and diverse forms, making generalization impossible.

Representing Islam: the Islamophonic example

Islamophonic started podcasting on 24 January 2007. Anchored by a young Muslim woman reporter, the podcast examines the various and complex levels of Islamic experience in the UK. The series is divided into three parts: reporting and discussion of a core issue (e.g., extremism), a “fatwa focus” (fatwas are given against specific questions asked by listeners), and a brief telephonic interview on current affairs with a Guardian reporter based in a Muslim-dominated country or region. Of late, this structure has been dropped and the whole episode focuses on one topic. Let us begin with the episode of 7 February that focuses on alcohol and Islam. The reporter (Riazat Butt) goes to Manchester’s Curry Mile to interview young Muslims who celebrate the Islamic festival of Eid by getting drunk. The first two to five minutes of the podcast are particularly striking. People shouting, horns blaring, and ear-breaking music played on car stereo from a heavily crowded street (“thousands of young Muslims,” according to the reporter) and interviews with young Muslim revelers alternate with recitations from the Quran by an imam of the local mosque and a local restaurant owner’s complaints about how business is affected by the revelry. The imam recites a verse from the Quran and explains: “Islam is completely and totally against involvement in any form or any shape with the business of alcohol. Islam outrightly [sic] and completely forbids alcohol usage.”

The episode of 28 February deals with Islamic music. It begins by playing samples of Islamic music from across the world and the reporter asks an imam for expert opinion on what the religion says about music. The Imam explains:

> **Islamic scholarship has been divided about the rulings relating to music … The basis for those who feel or believe that music is forbidden in Islam is [a] number of sayings from the Messenger Muhammed (peace be upon him) in which musical instruments are likened to the tools of Satan … There is a group that says that string and wind instruments are forbidden; however, the drum is allowed. There is another school of thought that says that … contemporary music is forbidden; however, music which enhances one’s spiritual well-being is allowed …**

This is followed by an interview with a member of the British Nasheed group Shaam. He speaks about how his group is adapting Nasheed to contemporary Western music. This is juxtaposed with a local restaurant owner’s angry remark: “The way they [the youngsters] celebrate is just drive up and down the road flashing off their dads’ flashy cars … They block the traffic and our English clientele can’t come through …”

Above all, the reporting proves the impossibility of explaining all these diverse experiences using the term “Islam.”
Uncommon Media

From the spirituality of the Nasheeds and Qawwalis the focus switches to heavily politicized Islamic hip-hop and rap. Aki Nawaz, mainstay of the band Fun-da-Mental, speaks about his politics, religion, and music: “to heavily politicized Islamic hip-hop and rap. Aki Nawaz, mainstay of the Nasheed group singer and the Shia Islamic scholar speak about how English is being increasingly used to win new listeners and to bridge the divide among linguistically different Shia communities respectively. To make sense of their religion in a Western context, they have to interpret their traditions and adapt them to the new situation. Above all, the reporting proves the impossibility of explaining all these diverse experiences using the term ‘Islam.’ For instance, to understand the relative marginalization of the Afghani Shias within their own religious community, we have to understand their class status and linguistic differences. No amount of theology or religious history alone can help us to get a full grip on it. Similarly, the music of Aki Nawaz has more to do with a very Leftist brand of angry, anti-establishment politics than Islam. And even if the imams, the revellers, the Nasheed group singer, and the Shia scholar, all lay claim to represent Islam, we will have to look elsewhere, to social and historical factors, to make full sense of the diverse behaviours and views.

Conclusion

The power of negative media coverage is such that even when proximity with the “Others” (in our case, Muslims) is a reality—for example, in a very multicultural and multiethnic society like Britain, where at least some sort of familiarity (e.g., at work places) with Muslims exist—it is insufficient to challenge that coverage. Poole writes: “To override dominant media representations, the contact must include dialogue that encourages an understanding of Islamic beliefs and practices, and a sense of how these are interpreted through one’s own cultural frameworks.” By focusing on aspects of Islamic life mostly ignored by the media, representing them in all their complexity and shunning the obsession with “problem-news” when it comes to Muslims, Islamophonic might be doing what Poole is recommending. Islamophonic’s reporting also raises some other important questions—is there a British/European Islam, distinct from its counterparts in other parts of the world? What does it mean to be a Muslim in the UK/Europe? Moreover, significant is the fact that such an initiative has been taken by a mainstream media group which owns one of the world’s most accessed and trusted newspaper websites. The result could be that the message would reach more people and have more impact.

Notes

2. The episodes of Islamophonic were accessed at http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/podcasts/cat-766/. No transcripts are available and the portions of the programme reproduced in this paper were transcribed by the author.