

BIMA: Media Usage and Response During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

A strong body of research suggests that Muslims are represented within a predominantly negative framework in UK's mainstream media (Poole and Williamson, 2021). The anti-Muslim undercurrent within Western societies is strengthening, with media filtering information to selectively portray Muslims as a threat to the nationalist project, perpetuating the processes of "othering" and stigmatisation (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic provided further opportunity for this negative portrayal ranging from unsubstantiated conspiracies of "Muslim mass graves," to blaming Muslims for the spread of the pandemic. This followed the unprecedented notion that Muslims "won't follow our rules," highlighted by politicians within mainstream media (Muslim Council of Britain, 2020, Poole and Williamson, 2021).

Furthermore, The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that Muslims had the highest mortality rate when compared to other faith groups, with Muslim men 2.5 times more likely to die than their Christian counterparts (Office for National Statistics, 2020). However, the burden of the pandemic and adverse reality Muslims were subjected to was largely obscured within mainstream media and ignored in public discussions (Poole and Williamson, 2021).

An examination of UK newspaper coverage of Muslims during the pandemic suggested that this further supported a framework in which the identifier of being "Muslim" is irrelevant unless it signifies "difference" (Poole and

Williamson, 2021). This "othering" was further supported by prejudiced comments made by politicians. For example, Craig Whittaker MP stated that "BAME and Muslim communities did not take the pandemic seriously" (Muslim Council of Britain, 2020). This is merely one example of several statements and headlines that propagated the negative portrayal of Muslims during the pandemic.

This brings forth the role of the British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA) during this unprecedented time. BIMA is an internationally recognised organisation of over 5000 members, that aims to support and represent Muslims within the NHS, alongside promoting a better understanding of Islam to non-Muslims. BIMA works to bridge the understanding of Muslim patients within the wider healthcare system as well as facilitating support and advocacy for its Muslim healthcare professional colleagues.

Through its engagement with the Muslim community, the organisation aided the implementation of several volunteer initiatives that provided support for the pandemic effort. These initiatives, alongside the provision of culturally and faith-specific guidance and interventions specifically catered to the spiritual and physical needs of the Muslim community. By working within the NHS, BIMA was able to simultaneously enable recognition from non-Muslim stakeholders including Governmental agencies, national and international media outlets as well as local healthcare organisations who were aiming to engage with the

communities in a similar space. It is through this recognition, alongside the engagement of those stakeholders, that a positive voice was established for Muslims in media representation. A voice that has historically been underrepresented, or even non-existent.

BIMA's engagement with the Muslim Community:

Through utilising the tools of media, focused initiatives and interventions catering specifically to the Muslim community, including culturally appropriate and linguistically specific faith-based guidance, was communicated nationally.

This included specific statements outlining BIMA's support of the COVID-19 vaccinations. Research suggested that many UK Muslims, particularly from ethnic minority backgrounds, were at greater risk of COVID-19 related complications, but also tended to be more vaccine hesitant. Through reviewing multiple schools of thought and medical opinions, BIMA produced position statements highlighting why the Moderna, Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines were both medically and spiritually compatible (for eligible individuals). This included statements pertaining to the contents of the vaccine, such as the use of alcohol or animal products, alongside why this was particularly important for the Muslim community.

Furthermore, by building on the BIMA Rapid Ramadan Review conducted in 2020 in light of the pandemic, BIMA produced a compendium to assist both health-care professionals and Muslim patients in making medical decisions during Ramadan. This included informative recommendations relating to common medical conditions, those who may consider fasting, those who should not, alongside how best to manage their condition whilst fasting. Furthermore, questions regarding the uptake of vaccinations and parenteral forms of medication whilst fasting were also addressed within these guidelines (British Islamic Medical Association, 2021).

In collaboration with the Muslim Council Britain (MCB), BIMA also led on the formation of Covid Response Groups since the beginning of the pandemic (Muslim Council of Britain, 2020). UK Government guidance was adapted to the specific needs being faced by the Muslim community. These projects included communication of key adaptations that were required to facilitate Muslim practices including communal prayers, adaptation of

janazah arrangements as well as provided key information regarding how to manage hospital admissions.

Furthermore, BIMA utilised media to showcase how the Muslim community was supporting the pandemic national response, such as the collaboration between Masjid Ghousia and the NHS in creating a 60-bed unit in the mosque, open to all, to relieve some of pressure that the NHS was facing (Muslim Council of Britain, 2020).

Overall, it is through media and stakeholder engagement that BIMA was able to efficiently support, encourage and educate the Muslim Community during the pandemic.

Furthermore, it is through media engagement that the work of BIMA has been recognised by its non-Muslim affiliates, enabling a platform by which Muslims can be further represented and advocated.

BIMA's engagement with the non-Muslim community:

BIMA considers its engagement with non-Muslim stakeholders to be hugely important as it allows a voice of representation within national media. Furthermore, raising awareness of the Muslim community has enabled the provision of greater support by the state to cater to the specific needs of Muslims.

For example, it is through forming relationships with non-Muslim stakeholders that the pioneering Academic research established in the Ramadan Compendium was shared nationally by Royal Colleges, NHS societies and MP's (Muslim Council of Britain, 2020). In Ramadan 2022, the Secretary of State, Rt Hon Sajid Javed also referenced the compendium in his Ramadan message.

Furthermore, through BIMA's discussions with the royal colleges, the provision of "disposable hijabs" was implemented across NHS trusts nationally (British Islamic Medical Association, 2020).

Overall, through using media to engage with the Muslim community, BIMA has been recognised and formed strong relationships with its non-Muslim counterparts. It is these relations that have enabled a voice of representation for Muslims, beginning to break the negative biases that have historically consumed mainstream media.

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