


Critical Dialogue

Covering Muslims: American Newspapers in Comparative Perspective. By Erik Bleich and A. Maurits van der Veen. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022. 224p. \$99.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.
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Forty years after the publication of Edward Said's *Covering Islam*, the book *Covering Muslims* positions itself as a “conscious echo” (p. x) of that work. The material, time period, and scientific approach differ, but now as then the state of affairs in news coverage is dismaying. Articles mentioning Muslims or Islam in American newspapers between 1996 and 2016 are strikingly and pervasively negative in tone.

The scale of *Covering Muslims* is prodigious. In the United States alone, Erik Bleich and A. Maurits van der Veen scrutinize more than a quarter of a million articles mentioning Muslims or Islam, appearing in seventeen national and regional newspapers, plus more than half a million additional articles for comparisons with other groups, not to mention yet another half a million and more newspaper articles in Britain, Canada, and Australia, all stretching over the same time period from 1996 to 2016. This analysis is further supplemented by examination of a selection of newspapers in East Asia, South Asia, and Africa, analyzed over a shorter and more recent time period. Much is done with this mass of material and the methodology is cutting edge. Sentiment analyses register variation in tone; collocation analyses recover variation in content; topic modeling adds inductive exploration to deductive interrogation.

Science is cumulative. Political science tends to be adversarial. *Covering Muslims* is a model of how political science can and should be done. It is unblemished by the desire to show that previous researchers have got things wrong—just the reverse. Its principal strategy is *deductive*, with deductive emphasized for a reason. In political science, deductive is synonymous with reasoning from first principles. Bleich and van der Veen introduce a companion usage—deducing predictions from previous empirical claims. Treating previous research as a seed bed of

promising ideas, they systematically harvest it for testable predictions about the degree, not merely the direction, of negativity (tone) over time and across countries, types of newspapers, and topics.

What do we learn? Not simply that newspaper coverage of Muslims is negative in tone. How much more negative, when, and compared to whom are everything in the quantitative departments of political science. With a few assumptions of scalability, Bleich and van der Veen put a number on how overwhelmingly negative is the coverage of Muslims. We learn also that the insight that foreign news tends to be more negative goes a good way towards explaining the tone in coverage about Muslims and Islam. Only 9% of articles mentioning Muslims or Islam are set uniquely in a domestic location (p. 53). In addition, the attention to Muslims and Islam in American news in the period examined is strongly connected to coverage of violence. Articles mentioning violence make up 73% of all the pieces in the corpus (p. 53). The focus on terrorism did worsen after 9/11, but instructively, the main change was not in the tone, which was already negative, but in the scale and topic of coverage (chapter 4).

Coverage in tabloids is even more negative, not surprisingly given reliance on sensationalism, but that is not the main point. The main point is that coverage is intensely, relentlessly, negative even in the national newspapers of record, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. This is what I would have expected, some might say. But we doubt anyone could say that they expected that ideologically right-leaning newspapers are not distinguished by negative coverage. And the reason, it is fascinating to learn, is that right-leaning newspapers publish more articles about religion—Islam as well as Christianity—and articles on religion generally have a less negative tone. Another unexpected finding: domestic political debates on value conflict are not found to be important independent drivers of negativity in coverage.

All in all, *Covering Muslims* is a catalogue of demonstrations of just how remarkably negative the coverage of Muslims and Islam is in American newspapers and beyond. Coverage of Muslims is decisively more negative than coverage of other religious groups—Catholics and Jews and, perhaps more surprisingly, Hindus, too. In the smaller subset of articles about Muslims in the domestic context, coverage of Muslims is more negative than that of

other minority groups. In other English-language democracies, Canada, Australia, and Britain, coverage of Muslims and Islam is relentlessly negative in the same way as in U.S. coverage.

This raises the question of whether there exists a globally negative news discourse about Muslims. The authors make a highly plausible case that this is unlikely. This is the most tentative part of the analysis, relying on the least amount of material, collected from a more recent period than examined in the rest of the book. Still, the main argument is very likely to be correct. Where Muslims and Islam have a larger place in domestic society and politics, the coverage is more varied, more average, less dominated by articles mentioning violence and extremism. For example, the coverage in an English-language newspaper in a majority Muslim country like Malaysia includes articles on Islamic finance, debates on Islamic jurisprudence, and announcements of burials.

So, newspaper articles mentioning Muslims or Islam are overwhelmingly negative in tone in Anglophone democracies. We suppose the same could be demonstrated in non-Anglophone newspapers in Europe as well had they been analyzed using the same methodology. Taking this insight in *Covering Muslims* as the starting point, what are the new important questions to be raised for discussion?

One is how we should think about what happened in the United States just after the completion of the empirical part of this study—the election of a Republican president, Donald J. Trump, who in the mold of European far-right leaders publicly constructed Muslims and Islam as an existential threat. How, when coverage is nevertheless relentlessly negative, should we think about the role of far-right political leadership and power? Would the quite provocative conclusion that it does not much matter be warranted based on the argument advanced in *Covering Muslims*? Why or why not?

A second question is how we should think about the relationship between news coverage and the construction of villains in wars and conflicts in which the United States is involved. One way to think about that question is through a historical counterfactual that, perhaps one day, may open itself to empirical analysis. What would be the result had a similar analysis been done on newspaper coverage during the Cold War, and perhaps especially, in the period of McCarthyism? In that period, Communists and “Soviets” were singled-out as the principal foreign threat to the nation. Today they are no longer in the limelight. Can this example serve as a counterfactual to suggest that it is possible for coverage of Muslims to change and become less relentlessly negative, if and when the constructions of America’s friends and foes in the main wars and conflicts in the international arena change? Or will the additional factors associated with negativity in coverage of Muslims prevent this from ever happening?

For us as public opinion specialists, the larger point that *Covering Muslims* brings out into the open is the challenge of how to theorize connections between media coverage and public opinion. The headline result of the study is the temporal constancy of outlier levels of negative coverage about Muslims. The puzzle is that, in Western Europe, apart from oscillations in response to specific events (e.g., the 2015 refugee influx following the Syrian war), the trajectory of evaluative attitudes towards Muslims is not negative. And despite the growth of the far-right, who insist on seeing all Muslims as an existential threat, the main tendency across the largest share of the public in a range of Western European countries is to look past the far-right’s tropes and distinguish ordinary Muslims from extremists who label themselves Muslim (*The Struggle for Inclusion*, chapter 2). As always in public opinion research, measures and measurement are limited and imperfect. But the contrast between the overwhelming negativity in media coverage and the more multifaceted patterns in public opinion suggest that the influences of media coverage on public opinion is a far cry away from direct and uniform.

The deeper significance of media studies like *Covering Muslims*, then, may be the light they shed, not on mass attitudes, but on the sources of biases in perceptions of mass attitudes. We ourselves are midway through a study of such perceptual biases. The guiding idea is that openings in public opinion to build coalitions favorable to the inclusion of Muslims are systematically not perceived. *Covering Muslims* prompts a hypothesis about how such perceptual failures can come about. The relentlessly negative coverage of Muslims in news media can be a key factor encouraging overestimation of negative public sentiment towards Muslims. The risk is that politicians on both the left and right, as well as Muslims and non-Muslims in society at large, conclude that most voters in contemporary liberal democracies favor the exclusion of Muslims. This may be a natural mistake to make. In *The Struggle for Inclusion*, we present evidence why it will be a tragic mistake to make.

Response to Elisabeth Ivarsflaten and Paul M. Sniderman’s Review of *Covering Muslims*: *American Newspapers in Comparative Perspective*

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— Erik Bleich 
— A. Maurits van der Veen 

We thank Elisabeth Ivarsflaten and Paul Sniderman for their thoughtful review of our book. Here we elaborate on a few key questions they raise. First, our main corpus covers 1996–2016 and thus excludes the Trump presidency. Ivarsflaten and Sniderman wonder about the

impact of a political leader who trades in explicitly Islamophobic rhetoric. Our expectation is that the effect would be marginal. After all, most newspaper coverage of Muslims is not directly related to the statements of political leaders, even extreme ones. Moreover, there had already been a steady drumbeat of Islamophobic rhetoric from the political right for many years; Trump's own statements likely added negativity only through direct reporting of those statements, which represents only a small fraction of all coverage of Muslims.

This raises the broader question of the source of the overall negative image of Muslims in the American public discourse. Our findings may be driven in part by a relatively recent—post-Cold War—construction of Muslims as an existential enemy. Yet, as Edward Said argued forty years ago, coverage of Muslims was already very negative in the 1970s and 1980s. An important contribution of our analysis is to show that negativity is not the only measure that matters. There are major differences between the earlier and contemporary eras in the volume of coverage as well as the linkage between Muslims and terrorism in the press; in our book we pinpoint a spike in both after 9/11. Ivarsflaten and Sniderman may be right that there was a previous jump prior to 1996, where our data start, either just after the end of the Cold War, or perhaps as far back as the Iranian Revolution. Identifying how far back these consequential patterns go is a promising avenue for further research.

A third question raised by Ivarsflaten and Sniderman links the findings of our two books. As they show, public opinion about Muslims is quite variegated. Given what we know about the impact of the media on public opinion formation, how can we reconcile this with the long-standing pattern of systematically negative media coverage we identify? This is a question of great importance that deserves a thorough analysis; here we offer some initial thoughts. First, most newspaper coverage focuses on foreign Muslims, who receive more negative coverage than do domestic Muslims. That matches Ivarsflaten and Sniderman's findings that publics are more suspicious of Muslims viewed as having a stronger connection to a foreign country. Second, we have shown in experimental work (Erich Bleich, Jeffrey Carpenter, and A. Maurits van der Veen, "Assessing the Effect of Media Tone on Attitudes Toward Muslims: Evidence from an Online Experiment," *Politics and Religion*, 2022) that the impact on attitudes of negative media coverage is mediated by individual-level variables such as anxiety. More research is required to identify the mediators and moderators that influence the relationship between negative media coverage and long-term attitudes and deeply held beliefs. Third, and relatedly, the media are only one source of information about other groups; when individuals learn about Muslims primarily through personal contact, the impact of media coverage may be attenuated

Juxtaposing the findings of our two books leads to a host of compelling research questions. We look forward to further research that enriches our understanding of the interactions between media coverage and public attitudes toward Muslims and other marginalized groups.

The Struggle for Inclusion: Muslim Minorities and the Democratic Ethos. By Elisabeth Ivarsflaten and Paul M. Sniderman. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 216p. \$95.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper.

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Elisabeth Ivarsflaten and Paul M. Sniderman's *The Struggle for Inclusion* not only makes a seminal contribution to our understanding of public support for the integration of Muslims in Western societies, it is also a model of careful and thoughtful marshalling of evidence, intellectual humility, and innovative thinking about research design. The main focus of the book is on understanding the terms upon which non-Muslims are open to including Muslims in their societies. The book shows that latent majority support for inclusion exists within multiple Western countries, but also that this may be contingent on how the terms for inclusion are specified. In the process of developing the empirical argument, the book also makes significant theoretical and methodological contributions.

As the authors show in chapter 2, motivating the central research question is that outright demonization of Muslims is a minority phenomenon. Instead, survey experiments in five European countries demonstrate that respondents are inclined to differentiate between types of Muslims. For instance, they show that a majority in each country is apt to approve rental of a local community house to "a Muslim congregation," but to oppose renting to "a Muslim fundamentalist group," just as they would not rent to a neo-Nazi group. Highlighting the tendency to differentiate within groups opens up the terrain for identifying the terms on which publics accept or reject Muslim inclusion.

Chapter 3 offers a theoretical elaboration of the notion of inclusion. Ivarsflaten and Sniderman unpack it into two different types of respect for minority members: *appraisal respect* and *recognition respect*. Applied to Muslim minorities, the former suggests that respect requires "a judgment that Muslim culture ... deserves to be held in high regard;" the latter, instead, requires that people "recognize the dignity of Muslims and take seriously [their] contributions" (p. 37). This distinction was initially introduced by Darwall in 1977 ("Two Kinds of Respect", *Ethics*, 88[1]: 36-49), but scholars have been slow to recognize its significance for the study of inclusion.

(Important exceptions include Galeotti's *Toleration as Recognition*, 2002, and Balint's *Respecting Toleration*, 2017, both of which are more theoretical than empirical in nature.) In the present book, the distinction is particularly important, as it helps readers evaluate the foundations on which support for inclusion rests in liberal democracies.

Chapters 4 through 7 investigate public support for a range of different examples of inclusion with varying implications for the type of respect implied. Chapter 4 shows that majorities of respondents defend publishers' rights to communicate material offensive to Muslims, as long as it is not inaccurate or unreasonable, but also that only small minorities feel such material *should* be published. Chapter 5 finds that comfortable majorities support an increasing emphasis on diversity in textbooks, but only about half support considerable *revisions* to textbooks. Chapter 6 asks about asylum seekers who have held jobs and become active participants in society, finding that such behavior increases support for their permanent integration. Finally, chapter 7 shows that respondents support public dissemination of Muslim ideas in general, but not the preaching of conservative ideas about the position of women in Islam, and that people are also much more distrustful of Muslim (religious) leaders who express a commitment to integration than they are of Muslims not in positions of authority who do the same.

It is impossible to do full justice here to the breadth and nuance of the survey results presented in the book. The data brought to bear on these questions are uncommonly rich, drawing on thirty-four experiments embedded in twenty-four large-scale surveys in eight different countries in Northwest Europe and the United States, conducted from 2013–2020. The authors develop a “sequential factorials” approach, an important methodological innovation, in which successive experiments are informed by the findings (or non-findings) of previous rounds, making it possible to hone in on more precise formulations of a question, or to test whether a particular finding is context dependent. Thanks in particular to the Norwegian Citizen Panel, the authors were able to conduct an unusually long sequence of carefully tailored surveys, each building on the preceding ones, and the results illustrate the value both of the sequential factorials approach in general and of having such a repeated panel to draw on.

Taken together, the survey data presented in chapters 4–7 sketch a fluid situation, in which inclusion is possible, but contingent upon “the *substance* of inclusionary options and the normative principles ... that underpin them” (p. 137). Different options may evoke competing normative considerations, and some options may produce a “polarization trap”—a situation where majorities favor inclusion but they are misunderstood as favoring exclusion because their support is conditional on the precise terms proposed by political actors (p. 10). This

trap may thus generate an “overestimation of illiberal forces” (p. 131).

The book concludes by suggesting avenues for further research, calling for a new approach to thinking about inclusion—one that recognizes the contingency of support for inclusion but also the necessity of respect for minorities. As the authors dryly note, “it has been our experience that a taken-for-granted recognition of one's worth is of secondary importance primarily to those assured of it” (p. 144). A particularly appealing aspect of the book is the intellectual humility of the authors. They openly note missteps made over the course of the inquiry along with attempts to correct them and limitations of those attempts. In keeping with the ethos exemplified by the book, we would like to suggest three additional lines of inquiry that complement and extend those already noted by the authors.

First, combining the sequential factorials approach with conjoint analyses, whether as part of a sequence of surveys or separately, could provide significant synergies. Conjoint analyses excel at identifying the implications and interactions of specific components of a larger question. For example, a conjoint study might investigate further Ivarsflaten and Sniderman's finding that citizens tend to distrust Muslim leaders, by varying whether they speak the local language, how long they have lived in the country, whether they participate in non-religious activities in their community, etc. Compared to sequential factorials, conjoint analyses make fewer demands of scholars, in terms of both funding and patience. On the other hand, they do not allow for sequentially sharpening a line of investigation, nor for learning from mistakes, as the sequential factorials approach does. There is therefore considerable appeal in creatively combining the strengths of the two approaches.

Second, while the book is framed as an inquiry into the inclusion challenges facing Muslims, some of the surveys pose questions in terms of immigrants, asylum seekers, or diversity in general. One survey specifically asks about “Muslim immigrants” (p. 159). The fact that response patterns across different specifications are consistent raises some intriguing questions. Is such consistency evidence that many people think of Muslims as immigrants and immigrants as Muslim? Would answers vary if respondents were prompted with a different group (e.g., Hindus, or Ukrainians)? And would it make a difference if Muslims were explicitly identified as citizens? Answering these questions is crucial to disentangling the relative contribution of religion and foreign origin, and to understanding whether the book's findings apply only to inclusion of the “Muslim minorities” of the subtitle, or to minorities more broadly.

To make this point clearer, in our own book, we find that coverage of Muslims in U.S. newspapers is notably more negative than that of other religious or minority

groups. Moreover, though this “Muslim penalty” shrinks when coverage focuses on Muslim *Americans*, it does not disappear. By analogy, we might expect that explicitly identifying Muslims as fellow citizens would reduce the size of Ivarsflaten and Sniderman’s findings, but not eliminate them. However, that is only a hypothesis; much remains to be learned about the effect on public attitudes of various combinations of citizenship, country of birth, religion, etc.

This brings us to a third topic for future research: the origins of public attitudes. To give one example, suspicion of Muslim clerics cannot have arisen from nowhere. As we note in *Covering Muslims*, a plurality of survey respondents in the United States get most of their information about Muslims from the media. Since the media play a consequential role across Western democracies, this suggests payoffs from building on the combined findings of *The Struggle for Inclusion* and *Covering Muslims* to answer questions such as: How do the quantity and source(s) of news consumption interact with respondent scores on the overall tolerance index? How does one’s main news source affect opinions about Muslims specifically? And is it possible to connect media coverage directly to survey results? To return to the earlier example, are Muslim clerics perhaps more frequently portrayed as at odds with mainstream society than are average Muslims?

Overall, *The Struggle for Inclusion* represents a major contribution to the study of diversity and inclusion in liberal democracies. It convincingly links survey findings to key theoretical questions about democratic norms and highlights the importance of respect as a foundation for inclusion. Its cautiously optimistic message about the openness of non-Muslims to including Muslims is refreshing. The findings open a rich vein of ideas for further research, while also offering tangible strategies for political entrepreneurs to promote inclusion in their societies.

Response to Erik Bleich and A. Maurits van der Veen’s Review of *The Struggle for Inclusion: Muslim Minorities and the Democratic Ethos*

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— Elisabeth Ivarsflaten
— Paul M. Sniderman

Ours is a simple idea. Research continues to concentrate on the intolerant. They oppose inclusion on any terms. To see if there is a way forward, we submit that it is necessary to hone in on those who are potentially open to inclusion. How far are they willing to go? Where do they draw the line? And why there and not elsewhere?

Bleich and van der Veen have said for us as well as we could say for ourselves the result that matters most. The *substance* of proposals for inclusion, just what citizens are being asked to agree to, is pivotal. As Bleich and van der Veen put it, “latent support for inclusion exists ... contingent on how the terms for inclusion are specified.” They pick out a particular pivot point – the difference between two conceptions of respect. The largest number across the political mainstream believe that the majority has a responsibility to publicly and privately recognize the dignity of Muslims and take seriously contributions of their culture and history (recognition respect). But they do not believe that the larger society has a duty to commend Islamic culture and traditions or agree that the larger society has an obligation to help sustain them (appraisal respect). Normative pivot points, we would emphasize, are politically consequential, not because the intolerant acknowledge them, but because they matter to those who are sympathetic to the ideal of inclusive tolerance.

We are heartened that Bleich and van der Veen recognize the methodological innovation in the *Struggle for Inclusion*, the sequential factorial design. We strongly believe that research should be iterative: benefiting by what is learned at each step to figure out the next step to take. The key to the sequential factorial is a repeatable template allowing, simultaneously, the introduction of new experimental interventions *and* the duplication of previous ones. A repeatable template thus offers a practical way to respond to the replication crisis. It dissolves the dilemma of having to choose to use always limited funds either to make a discovery or, alternatively, to make sure one has made a discovery.

Methods take you only so far. We are most indebted to Bleich and van der Veen for bringing out the depth of the theoretical challenge. In *Covering Muslims*, they have brought into the open how intensely, relentlessly negative are media representations of Muslims. We cannot think of a better way to underline the enormity of the challenge of the inclusion of Muslims in contemporary Western democracies. Still, our account of public opinion foregrounds the dynamism of democratic ideals. Others have documented their expansion. We analyze its consequences for the critical question of Muslim inclusion.

Our conclusion is that certain forms of political progress towards more truly inclusive societies are now within reach, in the sense that majorities will accept them. We suspect that this is the part of the book that will matter most to practitioners. For political science at large, *Covering Muslims* and the *Struggle for Inclusion* each in their own way illuminate the contradictions, shortcomings, and advances of liberal democracies grappling with the challenge of becoming more truly inclusive.