

‘You are no longer my flesh and blood’: Social Media and the Negotiation of a Hostile Media Frame by Danish Converts to Islam

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ABSTRACT

While surveys suggest that Danes value freedom of religion highly, in practice ethnic Danish converts to Islam report frequent negative responses to their Muslim identities, both in public settings and from friends and family. Our paper examines how active social media users amongst converts to Islam in the greater Copenhagen area negotiate both a predominantly negative media frame and negative personal reactions in their self-understanding, through personal conduct, and on social media. Interviewees report tensions between their Danish and Muslim identities, which they struggle to resolve constructively through tactics aimed at reducing the gap in majority perception between being Muslim and Danish – for example, through exemplary personal conduct, countering negative media representations, and emphasising shared values. However, most report frustration and tiredness at the daily effort and, over time, more pro-active discursive and media-based tactics tend to be replaced by a focus on local and personal relationships.

Keywords

Islam, conversion, stigmatisation, social media, racialisation of religion

INTRODUCTION

According to the European Convention on Human Rights (Articles 9 and 16), people have a right both to choose and to manifest their religion and, beyond being a signatory to this convention, respect for human rights is widely regarded as well entrenched in Danish society; indeed, Denmark is active in the promotion of human rights abroad (Danish Institute for Human Rights 2016). Furthermore, Danish ranking of the right to religious freedom compared with other rights is close to that elsewhere in Western Europe, if somewhat below that in the US; thus, in a recent poll, 27% of Danes ranked the right to choose a religion of one's own or none in their top five from a list of 15 rights, compared with 25% in Norway, 26% in the UK, 29% in Germany and 56% in the US (Kellner 2016).

However, societal responses to the exercise of religious choice may be a different matter. As Gudrun Jensen (2008) established, popular and family attitudes to the conversion of ethnic Danes to Islam can be hostile, an experience widespread across Europe (Rogozen-Soltar 2012; Özyürek 2014). This paper visits a different set of ethnic Danish converts to Islam¹, a decade after Gudrun Jensen's fieldwork (2005–06). This decade has seen the intensification of an association between Islam and terror, but also the advent of social media, which, with its capacity for many-to-many communication, has been linked not only with the further stigmatisation of marginalised groups and deepening of social divisions by enclosing us in our own 'filter bubbles' (Pariser 2011), but also with enabling minorities to self-organise and articulate their own 'voice' (Leurs et al. 2012).

The study is part of a Norwegian Research Council funded project, *Cultural Conflict 2.0: The Dynamics of Religion, Media and Locality in North European Cities*², which examines how mediatisation – and especially the interactive aspect of Web 2.0 communications networks – changes the dynamics of cultural conflict. Hence our interest in a group that lies on the fault-line of a perceived cultural conflict in the Danish case – ethnic Danish converts to Islam. For our respondents, Danish ethnicity and Muslim religiosity are experienced as largely mutually exclusive categories, even as they challenge the legitimacy of this binary; for example, our interviewee 'Henrik' expressed a wish to:

... tell the world that Henrik, who used to be Danish – or still is Danish – but in cultural terms is not Danish anymore because he is Muslim, is a good person. He is still a human being.

If Henrik is reflecting a prevalent view in Danish society, then such deep binary social categorisation is of great concern, as a range of studies converge on the view that the key to effective societal integration is the recognition that members of a society share intersecting and overlapping identities, to which such stark and exclusive binary forms of categorisation represent a major barrier (Vertovec 2007; Al Ramiah & Hewstone 2013; Scuzzarello 2015).

1. Our interviewees refer to themselves as 'reverts', using idea that all humanity is born into Islam as the one, original and true religion. Viewed like this, to change one's religion to Islam is always to go back to one's original religion. However, we use the less theologically charged term 'convert', to indicate someone who has changed religion.
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This paper examines how ethnic Danish converts to Islam experience negativity towards Islam and Muslims in the Danish media, indeed experience hostility and suspicion that often also extends beyond the media to their families, friends and the wider community; and how they respond to this in a range of ways, including in their use of social media. It begins with a review of six related areas of literature, discussing, in turn: socio-cultural perspectives on responses to stigmatisation; social media impacts on civic culture; how media frame Islam in Denmark; public attitudes to Islam in Denmark; characteristics of the Danish Muslim population, and the situation of converts to Islam in Denmark.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONTEXT

As Goffman (1963) observed, individuals who belong to stigmatised groups try to develop strategies to manage social interaction in ways that avoid causing awkwardness for others, while maintaining their own self-esteem (Lamont and Mizrahi 2012, 366). While the literature on individuals' responses to stigmatisation has mostly drawn on social psychological perspectives, recent work has also paid attention to cultural and structural factors, for example analysing differences in the cultural repertoires drawn upon by stigmatised groups according to national context (*ibid.*). Such enquiries have sought to establish 'how boundaries are accomplished through the unfolding of everyday interaction and the frames that ordinary people use, which interact with collective myths about the nation', and how individuals develop 'rhetorical and strategic tools' to negotiate and sometimes challenge these boundaries (*ibid.*). We seek to develop this line of enquiry by examining the tactics and strategies that ethnic Danish converts to Islam deploy as they straddle a boundary (that of Dane/Muslim) that has become increasingly racialised across Europe (Rogozen-Soltar 2012; Özyürek 2014). Our approach emphasises how individuals perceive, interpret and use media – especially social media – to negotiate the challenging media environment.

The advent of social media is associated with two conflicting trends. The first shows evidence of social media's greater potential to improve mutual understanding amongst a diverse public by enabling a wider range of voices to articulate their distinctive perspectives and experiences (Leurs et al. 2012) and to publicly discuss controversial issues (Herbert and Black 2012) than in an environment dominated by mass media (Bohman 2004). The second points at social media's influence on the fragmentation of the public sphere (Zamith & Lewis 2014), contributing to negative perceptions of democracy (Ceron & Memoli 2016), and with the mass circulation of negative stereotypes of cultural and religious minorities (Udapa 2016), malicious rumours, and misrepresentations and lies (Daniels 2009). These rumours and misrepresentations can be particularly damaging because the resulting distortions are so difficult to correct, whether by victims or media and political elites, because they can be so widely circulated without any effective control or intervention from media regulators (Flores-Yeffal et al. 2012). Thus, social media are implicated in a proliferation of false information and related hate discourse, features of what has been called the 'post-fact society' (Manjoo 2008).

But first, as with any new technology, the outcomes engendered by social media depend

on the cultural context with which they interact. Denmark is traditionally a social democratic society with high levels of social cohesion and relative homogeneity, which since the 1980s has experienced both increased levels of immigration and growth in populist anti-immigrant parties, with public controversies associated with the Muslim minority, especially in this century. Foundational amongst these was the Muhammad cartoons controversy in 2005, when the Danish government found itself at the centre of global protests and boycotts by Muslims angered at the publication of satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad by Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* (Lindekilde et al. 2009).

This incident occurred in an environment in which media bias against Muslims and Islam, and in which public expressions of hostility towards Islam and its followers had already been evident for some years, according to the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). As early as its second report on Denmark (2001), ECRI expressed ‘concern about the climate surrounding Muslims and Islam in Denmark, [and] recommended that the Danish Government undertake awareness-raising measures in the public sphere as well as in the education system to promote a more objective and informed perception of Muslims (2006, 25).’

By the time of third report, in 2006, in the wake of the Muhammad cartoons controversy, this concern had grown to the extent that ECRI was expressing ‘deep concern that the situation concerning Muslims in Denmark has worsened since its second report’ (ibid.). In the fourth report, these concerns persisted, evidenced for example by reports of bias in reporting of criminal cases and by a lack of opportunities for ethnic minorities to express their views in the media: ‘ECRI is aware of the view among some members of groups of concern to ECRI that they are being denied opportunities to express themselves in the media while no exception is taken to those, including academics, who express racist views in the media (2012, 28).’

These reports suggest an established negative media climate for Muslims in Denmark, also evident in our study period, which closely followed the terror attacks in Copenhagen in February 2015. Even articles in the left-leaning *Politiken* argued that the anti-Semitic attitudes of the gunman were part of a broader radical milieu, and showed politicians supporting a multiculturalist position (e.g. SF, Socialist People’s Party) on the defensive against the assimilationist DF (Danish People’s Party) (Astrup 2015a). Islam is framed in the context of Islamic State, oppressive family relations and attitudes to homosexuality (Hybel 2015; Astrup 2015b; Molgaard 2015), while people from ethnic minority backgrounds protest against attempts to publicly discredit them (e.g. Kivi 2015).

Survey data also evidences widespread negativity towards immigrants in general and Muslims in particular in Denmark (European Social Survey (ESS) 2014), even compared with elsewhere in Europe. Thus, 46% of Danes support the proposition that the government should allow ‘few or no Muslims’ to come and settle in the country, a finding consistent the YouGov figure of 45% of Danes having a negative impression of Muslims, the highest equal in Northern Europe (with Finland, Dahlgreen 2015). Returning to the ESS (2014), 42.3 % of Danes agree with the proposition that ‘immigrants take out more than they put in’ in terms of taxes and services, suggesting a competitive framing of the relationship between immigrants and the majority amongst a substantial section of the population, which is likely to reinforce societal divisions.

Danes also score highly on measurements of a sense of cultural superiority and on opposition to institutional anti-racist practices. Thus 59.9% of Danes agree with the proposition that 'some cultures are much better than others' (ESS 2014, second only to Norwegians, at 64.4%), an attitude which might be seen as fertile ground for forms of 'cultural racism' (Blaut 1992), or at least as providing weak foundations for practices which value the contribution to society of culturally different others, such as people from a Muslim background. Furthermore, 29.8% of Danes agree with the statement that 'having a law against ethnic discrimination in the workplace is bad for the country', far ahead of nearest rivals the Czech Republic (21.1%), Austria (20.7%), Switzerland (19.4%) and Hungary (17.9%), while the percentage ranking this proposition as 'extremely bad' in Denmark (12%) is more than twice as high as anywhere else in Europe. Strong public rejection of anti-discrimination laws may impact on Muslim minorities opposing workplace discrimination, and further underlines the sense of a negative public environment.

Furthermore, some evidence suggests that this negativity extends to Danish government policies and public institutions. For example, government policy discourse has been argued to contribute to reinforcing a dichotomous division between 'Muslims' and 'Danes' by delegitimising conservative Muslims voices through an overly broad official discourse on radicalisation (Kühle and Lindekilde 2012). In this process, Muslims who hold conservative views on gender and sexuality, which overlap with some in the majority population and had previously considered part of legitimate difference in values, are grouped together with those of radicals.

Barriers to inclusion in public institutions are not necessarily a matter of overt hostility, as in much media commentary, but rather may arise from strongly marked differences linked to a history of relative homogeneity. As Nielsen comments in his introduction to *Islam in Denmark: the Challenge of Diversity*, if one is not Lutheran or of Lutheran heritage, then:

[i]n the Danish context, the institutional structures are such that it is difficult to avoid being reminded one is somehow different. Although one of the most secular societies in Europe, Danish society and institutions are thoroughly impregnated with Lutheran Christianity. Normally less than 3 percent of the population is in church on Sundays, ... [but] 80 percent are members of the state sponsored Lutheran church. (2012, 3-4)

What cultural resources or cultural capital (Deuchar 2011) might Danish Muslims draw on to negotiate these challenges? The profile of the Muslim population resembles that of elsewhere in Northern Europe: labour migration was the dominant factor in the 1970s, as Muslims arrived from Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco and the Yugoslavia to work. As immigration policies became more restrictive but asylum policies remained generous, by the 1980s and 1990s the majority of Muslim arrivals were refugees and asylum seekers from war-torn countries such as Iran, Iraq, Somalia and Bosnia, until the right-wing coalition government from 2001 introduced one of the most restrictive asylum systems in Europe (ibid., 2-3). These, then, are not the selected professional 'green card' immigrants that have predominated in Muslim migration to the United States or Canada (Cesari 2014), but rather labour migrants from poor and often rural backgrounds and people fleeing war zones (though the latter may be diverse in their class and educational composition, and resources of social and cultural capital).

This linguistically and ethnically diverse population has faced considerable obstacles to organising and developing a public voice in Denmark. Nielsen describes Danish Muslims as caught in the crossfire between ‘a nationalist populism with right-wing tendencies and a more outward-looking spectrum of pluralist and cosmopolitan perspectives’, with the result that it is ‘a continuous challenge for Muslims – and others, but especially non-Christians – to take advantage of the freedom of assembly and organisation guaranteed by the Danish constitution’ (Nielsen 2012, 4).

This is not to say that Muslim communal life in Denmark has been entirely stifled – many local organisations and several national networks have developed, and there have been landmark public works such as the Grand Mosque in Copenhagen (the Hamad Bin Khalifa Civilisation Centre), which opened in 2014, and innovative projects such as the feminist-oriented women’s mosque, also in Copenhagen, which opened its doors in August 2016 (The Local.dk 2016).

However, with a hostile media providing limited opportunities for Muslim voices to be heard (ECRI 2012, 28) and a challenging institutional context, the division between ‘Danes’ and Muslims remains stark, with limited public recognition of and discursive opportunity to express the complex, intersecting and overlapping identities that several theories based on empirical studies (e.g. superdiversity (Vertovec 2007), political participation (Scuzzarelli 2015) and contact (Tausch et al. 20010) concur are critical to successful social integration. Hence, ethnic Danish converts find themselves located a fault-line in Danish society; indeed, Gudrun argues, they may be regarded as having crossed that line: ‘Due to the polarisation between ‘Danes’ and ‘Muslims’, Danes who convert to Islam are seen as people who have become ‘the other’, and thus are considered members of the immigrant minority population in Denmark. Converts may also be regarded as highly contradictory and dangerous beings.’ (Gudrun Jensen 2008, 390)

So, a decade on from Gudrun Jensen’s fieldwork (2005-6), our research question is, how do ethnic Danish converts experience their conflictual media and social environment, and how do they respond, in their self-understanding, their face-to-face interaction, and through social media?

SAMPLING, METHODS, AND DATA

This article is based on data from qualitative interviews with four male and six female converts to Islam from the Greater Copenhagen area. As the study focuses on media experience, use and response, the interviewees were recruited due to their religious affiliation, social media use and history. All respondents were active, or had been active, in debates in local newspapers or posts on social media related to their Muslim identity, including posting pictures of their hijabs on Instagram, statements about Islam on Facebook, and reposting content to debate. Thus, two respondents were recruited due to their Instagram posts, six for their Facebook activity, and two as they had written reader’s letters to Danish newspapers about Islam. All were contacted via e-mail or the social media platform they used. This purposive sample may not be typical of converts, but was chosen to provide insight into the media experience and use by converts.

The interviewees' ages ranged from 18 to 42 years, with three of the men being in their forties. The fourth man was 21 years old. One woman was 18 years old, the others in their twenties – from 21 to 29 years old. Time since conversion ranged from six months to fifteen years. The three older men each converted to Islam in the early 2000s. One of the women converted in 2007, the other six in the past four years.

The study was conducted through qualitative interviews between October 2015 and March 2016, either in a mosque or at a café chosen by respondents. After a few initial questions about name and age, all respondents were asked the same seven questions: 1) When did you convert to Islam? 2) What is your opinion about the Danish media, especially the media's approach to Islam? 3) Has your opinion about the Danish media changed since you converted? 4) Which social media do you use? 5) How do you use social media? 6) Has your use of social media changed since you converted? 7) Do you think that the ways in which Islam and Muslims are presented in the Danish media impact on your life and/or the way you behave in public?

FINDINGS

Perceptions and Use of Media: Continuity and Change

In February 2016, we met 24-year-old Louise – one year after conversion, and two months after she adopted the hijab. Louise was very active on Facebook, where she often posted statements about religion, Islam, Danish politicians and politics in general, and pictures and quotes from the Qur'an. Louise commented that she has always felt a need to stand up for the weak in society, including her Muslim friends:

I have always felt a need to protect my Muslim friends, because my family does not like Muslims and has always said so many ugly things about Muslims. Because that is what they hear from the media. Then I say, 'Listen, what you get from the media is not true, at least most of the time'. I think it is rare that the media write or say anything positive about Islam. I do not know why they cannot find positive things to write about – whether they just do not feel like it or do not want to. Because I only see positive things. I mean, it has changed me. I am more grounded and more friendly today than before I reverted³ (Louise, 24 years old).

Here, Louise addresses the media frame in Denmark, and how this impacts on her family and their views of Islam and Muslims. Throughout the interview, Louise repeatedly mentioned this perception, each time stating that the Danish media present Islam negatively. This is why, she says, she spends so much time on Facebook, defending *and* explaining Islam and Muslims. For her, someone needs to counter the media bias.

Like Louise, John also described the Danish media as anti-Muslim. However, unlike Louise, John no longer spends much time defending and explaining Islam online. When

3. See note 2 above.

John converted to Islam in 2000, ‘there were not that many media stunts – not so much.... focus on Islam and Muslims in the media’ (John, 42 years old). In this context, neither John nor his family considered his conversion ‘a problematic thing’. However, after 9/11, the media began to focus more on Islam and Muslims, often from a negative angle. At first, John found this new media frame ‘confusing’ and ‘depressing’, but basically considered the problem a lack of information, needing correction: ‘Back then, I was one of those people saying, “Come on, let’s talk” ... But that, I found out, is not always productive. When you are trying to shove things down people’s throat. So today, I am not pushy.’ (John, 42 years old.)

Thus, over time, John became more cautious in his attempts to explain Islam online. He still finds the media in Denmark ‘negative’, ‘narrow-minded’ and not really interested in alternative views. His frustration became especially clear towards the end of the interview. After stating that the media ‘divides’ the Danish people, he concluded, ‘So, all in all, my answer is that I think the media are terrible and a terrible tool, due to the ways in which they are used’, here referring to the ways in which both journalists, politicians and ordinary citizens in Denmark (mis)use the media. His hope for the future is that people, instead of debating on social media, meet in person and talk things through, whatever the subject is – religion, culture or politics: ‘Today, if someone approaches me [in person] with questions about Islam, I say, “OK, let’s talk.”’ Henrik and Jørgen, both 40 years old, also described the same transition. Like John, both were active in social media debates about Islam in the first years after their conversion, but have now largely stopped. This seems to be a result of both the experience of not being listened to when explaining Islam online, and of the spread and entrenchment of a predominantly negative frame.

Our last case concerning changing perceptions of media is 29-year-old Maria. Before her conversion, Maria was an active Christian. Although a couple of family members and friends find Maria’s choice to convert ‘kind of radical’, Maria sees more continuity than change. For her, she remains the same person; except for the number of Prophets she recognises, nothing has changed. On reflection, though, Maria did concede that her perception of the Danish media and her use of Facebook have probably changed more since conversion than she had realised.

Like the other respondents, Maria also finds the Danish media anti-Muslim and one-sided. In this judgment, she does not distinguish between different outlets or platforms. A formative experience occurred when the mosque she attends arranged a peace parade in Copenhagen. Beforehand, the media were not interested in the parade. However, when a couple of young boys of non-Western origin passed the parade and a gun was fired, the media suddenly began to write numerous articles about the parade, the mosque, and the mosque’s teachings. Maria finds this approach to Islam and Muslims highly problematic – so problematic that she ended her story by comparing Muslims in contemporary society with Jews during World War 2:

Again, they [the media] try to paint a picture – a wrong picture. To connect the shooting to the parade, even though the shooting did not have any relation to the parade or to Muslims. Therefore, I think that we kind of are in the same situation as the Jews were during World War 2, who were also blamed first for anything that went wrong’ (Maria, 29 years old).

MORE COMPLEX UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE MEDIA FRAME

As we have seen, when asked a direct question all respondents stated that they find the Danish media biased against Islam and Muslims. However, in the media content that they chose to re-post, some interviewees suggest a more nuanced understanding. For example, Louise reposted an article by Iranian born Danish feminist Nazila Kivi (2015) reflecting on Kivi's experience of attempts to 'silence' her by seeking to undermine her credibility as a speaker on minority issues. Critics argue that as a columnist in an influential national newspaper, Kivi cannot represent an oppressed group, because she does not share their experience of powerlessness. In response, Kivi argues that 'having talk time also does not change the fact that, every day in the media, people who look like me – people who could have been me – are referred to as the biggest problem for democracy, for the welfare system, for cohesion and for the country's future.' (ibid.)

By reposting such material, Louise suggests awareness that Danish media is not monolithic in denying minority voices – Kivi has a column in national newspaper – but also that the presence of such voices does not redress deep inequalities.

Similarly, both Louise and Maria reposted an article by Benner (2015) that brings out some of the ambiguities and complexities involved in the media's representation of Muslims, and the power dynamics involved. The article discusses the case of a young Muslim participant in a reality television program who sought to withdraw her consent to broadcast some of the video diary material she had filmed during a trip to Iran. While the article highlights pressure from the woman's 'community' in shaping her wishes, and hence fits with common Danish media narratives of 'community' oppression of women and denial of free speech (see e.g. Muna 2015), it also highlights media power, and the interview with the program's director reflects a nuanced understanding of Muslim diversity.

In Stuart Hall's (1997) terms, both the articles and the women's choice to re-post them suggest a 'negotiated' rather than a straightforward 'dominant' or 'oppositional' reading of the Danish media. Posting Kivi's article suggests recognition that minority voices do get some coverage, although this does not create a level playing field; posting Benner's article suggests some recognition of the ambiguities of media power. Hence, while some of the statements of our interviewees suggest a simple rejection of a monolithic media, their media practice suggests a more nuanced picture.

WIDER MEDIA HORIZONS AND NEW PERSPECTIVES

As stated, all respondents considered their view of the media had changed since conversion, at least on reflection, as had what they wanted from the media. For example, four respondents (Maria, Kathrine, Louise and Henrik) all said that, after reversion, they began to read foreign news sites, for example Al Jazeera and Russia Today (both in English). This was because they had become more interested in the Middle East, including the conflicts there, and found Danish media coverage inadequate. These respondents' horizons had widened; they want access to material and perspectives not well covered in the Danish media. For

others, though, it was their awareness of media framing media that had changed. One respondent exemplifies this tendency well.

21-year-old Cecilie converted to Islam when she was 19 years old. When we met, she had been a practising Muslim for two years. Cecilie, like Maria, was previously very active in a Christian congregation, and like Maria, Cecilie began to study Islam after reading numerous critical articles and hearing many negative stories about Islam and Muslims in the media. After Cecilie had studied Islam at a local mosque for a couple of months, she decided to convert.

When Cecilie was asked whether she thought her perception of the media had changed after conversion, her answer was immediate:

Yes, I have become more attentive to how the media frame everything. And aware of the power the media possesses. My opinion is that their power is huge. Moreover, the media is not reliable, or not as reliable as I have always thought. I mean, I have always been the kind of person who... just trusted the news, you know. But I have found out that, in fact, the news is not reliable. It is not that they are lying; they just frame things in their own interest, I would say. And I have become more aware of that (Cecilie, 21 years old).

This new perception of the media as shaping the representation of reality rather than as simply reflecting it was also something 23-year old Sonja mentioned several times. Sonja reverted to Islam when she was 15 years old. Before conversion, she had not watched the news or read newspapers. This she has begun to do over the last three to four years. Therefore, she could not reflect on whether her perception of the media has changed since conversion, she did offer insights into how she understands the media to work.

First, she argues that the media construct many problematic stories about Islam and Muslims. For example, on several occasions the media have presented stories about Muslims demanding that kindergartens, hospitals and other public institutions stop serving pork – stories that, according to Sonja, stir up opposition to Muslims in Danish society. Her view is that many of these stories are fabricated. No Muslim has ever demanded such a thing. Instead, what has happened, she contends, is that some public institutions have decided not to serve pork, because so many Muslims use these public services. However, the media present this as a response to overt Muslim pressure, rather than consumer demand.

At the end of our interview with Sonja, she summarised her perception of the Danish media and of the general conflictual media frame that lives with:

You are being pushed by the media, pushed by society, pushed by your own family, instead of being embraced. I think that this is why all these things (terror attacks etc.) happen. Because the media, and for that matter all these people taking part in hate speech etc., they push you away by saying, “You cannot be part of this... our society – go away!” That is why... you try and try, but anyhow you are being let down by society, schools, workplaces etc. Instead, we have to be open towards each other; we need to open our doors for each other. To let people come into our mosques and see what is going on. Moreover, our politicians should tone down their rhetoric (Sonja, 23 years old).

For Maria, as for all the respondents, the negative media framing of Islam and Muslims in Denmark is experienced as a pervasive environment to negotiate, a constant pressure to which they must respond.

RESPONSES: 'I JUST WANT TO TELL THE POSITIVE STORY ABOUT ISLAM IN PUBLIC'

Kirstine is an 18-year-old woman from a small town outside Copenhagen. Once a week she does voluntary work in the same Christian congregation where she was formerly a member. Her parents are still active in the congregation, so this, she says, is her way of showing them that she is still the 'same, good old Kirstine'. We met Kirstine seven months after reversion. Even though she was 'happy about her decision to revert to Islam', she claims she is still 'processing':

Interviewer: What do you mean by 'processing'?

Kirstine: You know, to learn everything about Islam and about living as a Muslim. And to get used to people's reactions... many people are so prejudiced.

Interviewer: Can you say more about that?

Kirstine: You know, the media often write that Muslim women are oppressed. That all we do is find a husband, give birth to his children, be a housewife and so on. I mean, this is the picture the media paint – this is not how I experience things in my everyday life. I mean, I am the complete opposite kind of woman. Of course, family is important to me, but so is education. But I am under the impression that this is how others see Muslim women – that they are not allowed to work, that they do not have any say in the family and so on (Kirstine, 18 years old).

Kirstine recounted several episodes from school, at family dinners and other social occasions, where classmates and family members had talked to her as if she was 'dumb', or as if 'the veil had shot down my intelligence'. When asked how she handles situations like these, Kirstine began to talk about her use of Instagram and Facebook.

Several times each day, Kirstine posts pictures on Instagram. Often, though not always, the picture is followed by a short text, where she addresses the prejudices she encounters daily. On several occasions, for instance, Kirstine has posted pictures of herself wearing the hijab, with red lipstick, or heavy makeup around her eyes, followed by a text about her being a young, modern and free woman. Her hope is that with posts like these can convince both those she refers to as her 'former Danish friends' and her mother, who has still not accepted Kirstine's decision to convert, that she is still the same person. Additionally, in order to show the world that she is not suppressed and dumb, she is now even more dedicated to her studies, and to gaining a university degree, and preferably a higher qualification such as a PhD. Thus, Kirstine's response to negative experiences is focused around an assertion of *continuity*. By means of activities in her former Christian congregation, Instagram posts, and so on, Kirstine aims to show her family, social network and society that she is still the same *free* and modern young woman – Muslim or not, veil or not – as she was prior to reversion – only better: more determined, harder working.

Like Kirstine, Louise, Sonja, Maria and Cecilie all touched upon the issue of the hijab, oppression and freedom, and they shared the view that society saw them as oppressed and unfree due to their wearing of it. Additionally, three of the female respondents also expressed frustration over being perceived as a potential terrorist and/or fundamentalist. However, the way these issues were framed, and their ways of dealing with these images, varied. Thus, while Cecile and Maria's strategy was to be smiling and friendly, Louise was more confrontational when perceived negatively, but also spoke of unexpected positive responses.

As stated, Louise had taken on the hijab two months prior to our meeting. The first time she went out in public wearing the hijab, she was surprised that she did not get any negative comments or reactions. Likewise, she was surprised when an older woman held open the doors for her at the grocery store:

At the beginning I was like... do they look at me, do they treat me differently now? I was totally surprised that an older woman held the doors for me... I was completely like "Hmmm OK?" I do not know why, but I just imagined that people would be more... (Louise, 24 years old).

Following this statement, we asked Louise whether now, after wearing the hijab for two months, still was still conscious of her appearance in public – and whether she still expected a reaction to her hijab. This she confirmed:

After I began to wear the veil and I sit on a train or something, then I can put some Arabic music on my headphones, and turn the volume up, so that people around me can hear it. I do not know why, but I just want people to see that it is OK – nothing bad will happen, just because I am Muslim. Moreover, if I greet someone on the train, when I get in or on my way out, then I greet them in Arabic. I probably just have a need to say that it is OK to be a Muslim, that it is not dangerous. I just want to tell the positive story about Islam in public (Louise, 24 years old).

Maria was likewise dedicated to telling a positive story about Islam, for example by smiling at people who look at her in a suspicious way. Additionally, Maria smokes cigarettes. This she has done for several years, and for all those years – including after converting to Islam – she has smoked in public. However, after taking on the hijab, she has stopped smoking in public:

Maria: I am a smiling person, and I know that I represent my religion in a good way, when I am out in public. But... I smoke cigarettes. And it is not that it is forbidden to smoke cigarettes, but it is not recommended. But [now] I do not smoke in public, because I do not want people to see someone with a veil wearing the veil smoke. Therefore, it is something I do at home.

Interviewer: Did you smoke before taking on the veil?

Maria: Yes, then I smoked whenever and wherever I wanted. Because then people could not see which religion I belonged to. So you can tell that I am very aware of my appearance? I can smile a little extra, if... it is obvious what people think of you – how they look at you – and then I smile and say, 'Hi', even though I do not know them (Maria, 29 years old).

In addition to smiling and listening to Arabic music in public, both Louise and Maria use Facebook in their efforts to counter media representations of Islam and Muslims. For example, Louise recounted how, when she finds what she considers to be inaccurate and/or prejudiced material concerning Islam and Muslims in *Ekstrabladet*, the Danish tabloid paper that she reads, she will repost the article on Facebook, adding a comment or correction to disputed passages, and, as we have already seen, she also reposts debate articles from *Politiken*.

While our male respondents are not as visibly Muslim as the females, they also feel an obligation to represent Islam in a positive way in how they present themselves and behave. However, in contrast to most female respondents, who all use social media to counteract misrepresentation or demonstrate bridging, the male respondents do not. One used Facebook to run a group campaign for Palestinian independence for which he was the administrator, but he did not engage as an individual in defending Islam and Muslims in general. Another, John, described how he gone through a period of being active in apologetics on Facebook, but gradually became disillusioned because of the amount of negative posts he received. Instead, he has come to focus on face-to-face interactions:

I must say, when I first reverted, I did not think about it. Back then, I just was myself. But lately it has become really important to me, if I meet new people, e.g. at work or at school, then I always say good morning, and if I am at some shopping centre or something, then I hold the doors for the person behind me. I am more conscious about, I think, that I want to do something extra for people. Not because I want their acceptance, because I do not need acceptance from anyone other than God. Still, I do not want people to feel fear when they see me. Instead I want them to remember that I said 'Good morning', or 'Can I help you?', or 'Are you OK?' But... yeah, I think that we Muslims have to be more positive and energetic. I do not think that we deserve to have to. I do not think it is fair that we have to fight more in society than non-Muslims, but that is just how things are (John, 42 years old).

NEGOTIATING CONFLICTED IDENTITIES

It is not only in their day-to-day actions and interactions that the negative media frame in Denmark affects our respondents; their self-understanding and identity is, at times, experienced as conflictual and problematic. Thus, several respondents talked about what they experienced as a widespread 'Us and Them' dichotomy in Danish society and elsewhere, where 'Us' is the ethnic Danish majority and 'Them' is the Muslim minority in Denmark. Due to this dichotomy, several respondents felt that they were 'marginalised' (Jørgen, 40 years old), or 'cut in two pieces', as Henrik (38 years old) said.

Female respondents report the same pressures, especially in relation to their families. All of them told of family members, parents, uncles, or cousins who had reacted strongly against their conversion. In such situations, the respondents often feel that their identity and 'belonging' is being challenged, that they no longer belong in their families or in Denmark. Thus, Sonja repeatedly went back to this issue:

Some family members of mine do not like Muslims, and say disgusting things about them. That makes me sad. Because I am also Muslim, I am just like 'them', because I have the same understanding of Islam as 'they' have. And it is obvious that there is a division between me and the others in my family, because they do not like Islam. They do not know how to deal with the situation, what to say to me.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel?

Sonja: Tired. But you have to fight. If you stop fighting for what you really love, you will fall to pieces. There is also one more thing that makes me continue fighting. I can see how the Prophet got harassed and his family killed for what they believed in. So what am I supposed to do? Should I just leave what I believe behind, and just go out and be a normal person, as my family wants me to? (Sonja, age 23)

Partly by drawing strength from the example of the Prophet, and partly through her own steadiness, Sonja has accepted these battles, including the ongoing negotiation about identity and belonging. But mostly, in relation to fellow ethnic Danes, she feels like an outsider in her once familiar circle.

As stated in the previous section, most female respondents touched upon the issues of oppression, veil/hijab and freedom during the interview. When they were asked about their identity, about how they identify and define themselves, several female respondents returned to this theme, especially with a focus on themselves as both *free* – as opposed to oppressed – young women, and *freed* from contemporary sexism. This was something that Louise, Maria, Kirstine and Sonja all mentioned. Thus, according to Maria, she is no longer objectified:

Generally, men are more respectful now; they talk to me in a more respectful manner. Earlier... I mean, you are treated as an object. At least I was. Obscene comments, sexist invitations etc. But now, with the veil, it is completely different. They talk to you as a person – as a person and not only as something or someone who they want to have sex with (Maria, 29 years old).

Louise also talked about men who, prior to reversion, treated her disrespectfully, as an 'object', and, like Maria, today she also feels freed from this. Also – and to some degree due to this – Louise considers herself more special (recognised and respected as a woman) today than prior to reversion, and especially prior to taking on the veil:

I don't know, but when you wear the veil, you feel more feminine in a way, because then you wear a long dress and you become shy in a way. I just feel, that now that I wear the veil, I feel more special, and that I have to look out for what I have. And therefore, I don't have eye contact with males anymore (Louise, 24 years old).

One respondent did not express difficulties in negotiating tensions between his Muslim identity and his ethnic Danish identity and social circle. For 21-year-old Hans, the matter seemed more settled and resolved. His transition to the Muslim community felt complete, so

When I re-verted I was like... the identity that I had before, I left it behind me. ... I feel I belong on the other side, in a way. Because the other identity is in a way left behind. And a new identity has been constructed, in a way. And now I am Muslim. And I have changed my name (Hans, 21 years old).

Thus, all our respondents experienced tensions between their ethnic Danish and Muslim identities, but dealt with it in different ways. In some ways, Hans's is the most radical, embracing his otherness (symbolised in his change of name) and no longer expecting to be treated as an ethnic Dane. The others all seek to behave in exemplary way, to demonstrate normality (by ethnic Danish standards) by modelling good behaviour through visible displays. For three of the women (Kirstine, Louise and Maria), social media was an integral part of this strategy. Instagram and Facebook gave them a platform to style themselves as both model young ethnic Danish women (e.g. Kirstine's eye make-up) and model Muslims (Kirstine's hijab), to challenge negative stereotypes of Muslims and to discuss the challenge Muslims face in Danish society. However, this 'straddling' comes at a cost; several respondents report being tired or exhausted at the effort, and are unhappy at what they experience as unfair; as John stated: 'I do not think it is fair that we have to fight more in society than non-Muslims.'

CONCLUSION

In our study, both faces of social media as intensifying stigmatisation (producing disengagement) and providing resources for its resistance and negotiation (as a platform for projecting overlapping identities, refuting prejudiced media coverage, and raising questions about the terms of integration) were in evidence. However, we found some differences in how ethnic Danish converts mobilise media resources in their struggle against stigmatisation, compared with previous studies of ethnic minority Muslims (Leurs et al. 2012). First, rather than engaging with transnational networks, the alternative perspectives to mainstream media that our interviewees sought were found chiefly on foreign broadcast media sites, including Al Jazeera and Russia Today. Second, whereas, for the Dutch Moroccan Muslim women in Leurs et al's study, social media provided a 'hush harbour' to share experiences with similar others and a space for organising resistance to oppressive measures (ibid.), while we found some engagement with minority politics, for our female interviewees social media functioned rather as a platform for countering what they saw as false information. Third, while for both groups platforms such as Instagram and Facebook were used to project a desired identity, for ethnic Danish converts this took distinctive form – combining exemplary features of both 'the good Dane' and 'the good Muslim', and emphasising perceived overlaps and intersections between them, such as the valuing of educational achievement, female autonomy, self-reliance, and physical attractiveness (albeit with differing modesty requirements).

These differences from ethnic minority Muslims may be contextual; the converts we interviewed may also be moved to share and campaign on specific issues, including drawing on transnational resources, although they may, at least initially, lack access to some

networks to do so. Rather, our study highlights different strategies for negotiating conflicted cultural identities, and the role of social media as a tool in that battle, albeit one that some – especially male respondents – felt had limited power to overcome prevalent media frames, preferring to use face-to-face methods to present a positive face of Danish Islam to fellow ethnic Danes.

Finally, in contrast to other recent studies of European converts (Rogozen-Soltar 2012; Özyürek 2014) we did not find ethnic Danish converts positioning themselves against ethnic minority Muslims as representing a culture-free Islam, ‘using a discourse that cloaks convert religiosity within an unmarked category of “European” and marks migrant Muslims as outsiders’ (Rogozen-Soltar 2012, 612). Rather, where relations with ethnic minority Muslims were discussed, it was in terms of the intersecting forms of discrimination that both groups face (e.g. Louise’s posting of Kivi’s article). Why this should be is unclear; perhaps because our converts were less influenced by Salafi forms of Islam, which tend to deploy a religion-culture dichotomy (Özyürek 2014, 109-131), or because our questions were framed in terms of negotiating media, or because our sampling method (via social media) led us to a different segment of the convert population. Whatever the reason, negotiating the predominantly hostile Danish media frame seems to have reinforced a sense of solidarity with fellow Muslims, and their bridging efforts to reach out to other ethnic Danes, whether through exemplary behavior or social media activism, were made on that basis.

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