Audience Contradictions in the Negotiation of Controversial Cultural Media Content
The Case of Muslim Women Journalists in Niqab

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Abstract

This paper analyses how people negotiate representations of other cultures in the media, in particular those traits that can be considered controversial in the sense of generating strong opinions and opposing stances. A news story about an Egyptian television channel run by Egyptian women journalists wearing the niqab (Maria TV) was used to stimulate debate in four focus groups. Although most of the participants initially criticized the approach adopted by the television channel, they also expressed opinions on journalists in niqab that agreed with the representation proposed by the channel. The article shows that even though audiences may seem capable of criticizing media biases, they do not recognize their own internalized prejudices and, ultimately, accept the discourse proposed by media.

Keywords: *Islamophobia, Audience, Interpretation, Spain, Television, Media*

Introduction

The presence of non-Christian communities in Europe has not been supported by a strong commitment to diversity and mutual understanding. Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1997), which laid the foundations for a debate on the impossibility of understanding between cultures, outlined the existence of closed, exclusive civilizations in which religion is the main identifying and differentiating factor. Since then, several authors (Afshar 2013; Murtuja 2005; Sen 2007) have warned of the increasingly Islamophobic attitude found in much of the European media. As signalled by Edward Said (1978, 1997), European media continue to reflect a homogenous 'Islamic world', anchored in a medieval past, reified by the weight of religious tradition and in perpetual struggle against a Western world held up as a symbol of modernity, freedom and progress (Afshar 2013; Blair 2012; Doyle 2011). The emphasis on a label as broad as that of 'the Muslim world' leads to dangerous oversimplification, reinforcing the idea that religious affiliation is the exclusive identifying feature of Muslims while effacing other aspects of their identity that may be shared with non-Muslims. The message that Islam is an obstacle to understanding non-believers and people of other religions is thus reinforced.

This paper aims to analyse how Spanish audiences negotiate the meanings conveyed by controversial news stories — in the sense of generating strong opinions and opposing stances — in which cultural aspects play a central role. In particular, we were interested in the debates that arise after exposure to news stories in which Islamic people — women in particular — are represented and where the media bias is explicit. As a stimulus, we used a news story about the Egyptian television channel Maria TV, broadcast by the Spanish channel Telecinco, and analysed the reactions and opinions of the participants. We were particularly aware of a critical approach, but also of prejudices and stereotypes triggered in negotiating the meaning of actions represented in the news story.

Stereotypification of Muslims

Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All (Runnymede Trust, 1997) was a classic publication that demonstrated that most Western media outlets resorted to a series of stereotypical characteristics in their representations of Islam. This stigmatizing view was based on several possible reductionisms. Thus, Islam is perceived as monolithic and static, isolated from the values of other cultures, irrational, primitive and inferior to Western thought, aggressive, violent and implicated in the 'clash of civilizations', interested in promoting certain military and political interests and intolerant of Western criticisms; moreover, hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory and exclusionary practices such that anti-Muslims attitudes have become normalized (Runnymede Trust 1997: 4). As Sartori (2001: 53) observes, "European xenophobia is focused on Africans and Arabs, especially if and when they are Islamic. That is to say, it is above all a question of cultural and religious rejection". Reinforced, in general, is a vision of the Muslim religion as not just another belief but rather as a problem for the West because of its radicalism and incompatibility with Western values. Thus, while perceptions of endogroup members (Europeans) are characterized by diversity and difference, perceptions of exogroup members (Muslims) are stereotyped. Despite initial controversies generated by the concept, in 2004 the Council of Europe defined Islamophobia as "the fear of or a prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them" (Council of Europe 2004: 6).

Authors like Marranci (2004) criticize the media focus on 'Muslims in Europe' and their lack of discussion of 'Muslims from Europe'. This view is similar to that of Allen (2010), who observes that Islamophobia is an updated racist ideology, and that of Taras (2013), who warns of the danger of the 'racialization' of Islam by certain European political parties and media outlets.This 'racialization' is understood as a strategy that aims to gradually develop, maintain and justify attitudes of rejection and fear of Muslims. All this is accompanied by a certain historical amnesia with regard to Islam's important role in shaping European culture. In a study of the influence of Islam from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, Vernet (2006) reminds us of how we have overlooked its contributions to European culture in the fields of scientific and humanistic knowledge.

Kymlicka and Norman (2000) understand immigration as an example of diversity that enriches society. However, in the case of Spain, Muslim immigration in the last decade has been accompanied by increasingly negative perceptions of Muslims. A reason for this might be that perceptions of Muslims have been influenced by media representations. Muslims are commonly associated with images of crime, insecurity and anti-social behaviour (Martin Corrales 2002). Miralles (2005) shows how some alarmist newspaper headlines communicate a sensationalist vision of religiously radical Moroccan immigrants arriving to the Spanish coast in makeshift boats. As Peña-Ramos and Medina (2011) warn us, many media

outlets use insidious expressions — for example, labelling children born in Spain to parents of Moroccan origin as 'second- or third-generation Muslims' — that give the impression that they are not Spanish and that their main affiliation is to their religion.

One of the most comprehensive analyses of the Spanish press in this regard is a 2010 study, published by the Fundación Tres Culturas del Mediterráneo, which examined 2,100 editions and 9,422 articles from the six highest-circulation daily newspapers in Spain in 2008, namely, *El País, El Mundo, ABC, La Vanguardia, El Periódico de Catalunya* and *La Razón*. The study's conclusions confirm the use of a negative and stereotypical image of the Arab and Muslim world, while noting significant differences between newspapers according to editorial policy. Some newspapers genuinely demonized the Muslim world, while others tended to lend themselves to a stereotypical selection of topics (terrorist attacks, the war in Iraq and violations of human rights, particularly those of women and homosexuals). Especially interesting with regard to our objectives was how most of these media were reported to depict Muslim women. Thus, the presence of Muslim women in the news was associated with recurring themes such as polygamy, stoning, female genital mutilation and, above all, the use of the hijab, presented as a symbol of their subjugation. In the case of migrant Muslim women, therefore, there is triple discrimination in their representation as female, immigrants and Muslim.

In a later study of Spanish daily newspapers, Beck also concluded that media representations frame Islam as a negative cultural influence within Spain through topics such as the veil, polygamy, clitoral ablation or terrorism (2012). Navarro (2010) noted how the predominant representations of Muslim women in Spanish media reinforce stereotypes of submission, slavery and passivity. This does not occur exclusively in Spanish media; a study on representations of Muslim women in *La Libre Belgique* newspaper identified an "image of the female victim [as] subordinated and invisible", concluding that "woman is defined exclusively based on her relationship with a man (wife, daughter, mother, accomplice and/or rebel)" (Meddeb 2014: 35). Another study on representations of Muslim women, this time in the BBC, showed that the hijab remains a nodal semantic macrostructure when its comes to reporting on Muslim women. Muslim women are represented as passive, submissive and unwilling or unable to improve their own wellbeing (Al-Hejin 2015: 40). As demonstrated in studies by Doyle (2011), Hoodfar (2003), Klaus and Kassel (2005), Sloan (2011) and Welch (2007), the use of the hijab, the niqab and the burqa[1] has become a subject of debate in Western media. As noted by Rasmussen (2013), they have become a stereotype of what the European media understands of the Muslim world and/or Muslim women. The subject has now also become a symbol of increasingly Islamophobic discourse in Europe. In our research, as we shall demonstrate, a news story's emphasis on how women dress reflects the perspectives of society and is a strategy of differentiation from the 'other' that the study participants, in their role as spectators, could detect quite easily.

Different studies have analysed the difficulties posed by growing Islamophobia with regard to Muslim women's constructions of their own identity beyond simply being Muslim (Dwyer 2000; Touraine 2007). Processes of invisibility and/or passivity deny agency to Muslim women. A study of young British Muslim women of South Asian origin concluded that identity construction was a continual process of renegotiation between the pressures of family tradition, religion and certain typically Western aspirations (Dwyer 2000). In a similar vein, Abu-Lughod (2002, 2013) noted that hijab use by Muslim women can be viewed as a personal form of active resistance to the pressures of Westernization. This is similar to the observation by Shirazi and Mishra (2010) that, for some European Muslim women, unlike American Muslim women, wearing the niqab is an exercise in personal resistance to the pressures of assimilation.

Thus, when it comes to media representations of Muslim women, it is common for Western media to propagate notions of sub-alterity and stereotypical visions of cultural diversity (Bying 2010). The outcome is a reinforcement of the notion that women from 'other cultures' are ultimately responsible for upholding tradition and respect for the past (Dwyer 2000). Torres (2009) concluded the existence of a silenced alterity in the media. The stereotypical image of a veiled Muslim woman confined to her home, under the rule of her husband or male relatives, is held up as clear evidence of the incompatibility between Islamic and European values (Abu-Lughod 2002; Ali 2003; Doyle 2011; Macdonald 2006; Martin-Muñoz 2010; Read 2003). The Muslim woman – even if a working woman – is perceived, in the West, to be a married woman, loyal to a culture viewed as static and a wearer of external symbols such as the veil or the burka. She is perceived to be poorly educated, dependent and controlled by her family. This stereotypified dual alterity (as a woman and as a Muslim) is discriminatory and exclusionary, as her individualism is subsumed in an undifferentiated group, leaving her with no possibilities to exercise personal agency (Adlbi Sibai 2016; Cobo 2005). This is what Coene and Longman (2008) understand as a paternalistic view by most Western media of Muslim women.

Negotiating meanings

Media construct identity narratives, the meanings of which are then (re)negotiated by the audience. Since the well-known work on audience interpretation conducted in the 1980s, research has revealed the negotiation of meanings in media narratives (Hall 1993; Livingstone 1999), in both traditional media (Wood 2007) and in news media (Ostertag 2010).

Audience interpretation may be more or less critical of the version of reality suggested by the newsreader. Hall (1993) noted that television viewers make a dominant, opposing or negotiated interpretation. Although Hall's model was later refined somewhat (Morley 1999: 140), retained was the principle of an active audience that reinterprets broadcast messages. For Bødker (2016), central ideas within Hall's work remain useful when considering how people make sense of events. Thus, Hall's conception of active audiences that make use of previously acquired cultural skills to deal with meanings conveyed by media is still supported by many scholars (see Baker 1999)

Multiple factors are involved in the negotiation of the meanings conveyed by the media. Some factors are structural, such as the sociocultural background of the audience members and their involvement in the issue represented. Van den Bluck and Broos (2009) showed how the same Belgian television documentary about Muslim women was interpreted differently by a group of Flemish women and by a group of migrant Muslim women. Obviously, we should not neglect the weight that other factors — such as a people's current situation, their recent experiences or public opinion — can have on the interpretation of a message.

The negotiation of meaning is based on competences that are held in common but amended individually. In other words, there is a tendency to accept a limited set of agreed-upon interpretations — whether dominant, opposing or negotiated — all arising from collective interpretations that are subsequently amended by individual experiences. Although the production of televised news may be based on stereotypes that are shared by a majority of the audience, negotiating the meaning of the news story is ultimately an individual act. The audience can distance itself from the proposed media stereotype, identify and interpret other nuances beyond the surface discourse of the text and images, and develop more critical, complex and sophisticated meanings (Gripsrud 1999; Jensen 1999). Moreover, some viewers are able to detect manipulative strategies in the mediated information, despite this information describing a world disconnected from their own personal experience (Morley 1999). Thus, when a news story recounts facts and constructs identities that are outside the viewer's direct experience, the attribution of meanings is more difficult, so one solution is to resort to stereotypes. However, a critical and self-reflexive interpretation is still possible when the viewer is aware that he or she does not possess sufficient background knowledge to fully understand the event represented in the news. It could be objected that people are prejudiced while not being aware that they are. But, as pointed out by Brown (2010), a person may maintain a state of cognitive dissonance and make stereotypical judgements, yet, at the same time, be aware —even vaguely — that their stereotypical beliefs are not sustained by the evidence.

Sample and method

Participants and procedure

In order to analyse people's attitudes towards controversial cultural content in the media, in particular those in which Islam and Islamic women are represented, we used the focus group technique, well established as a means for analysing audience interactions (Ostertag 2010; Wood 2007). We conducted four focus groups (each consisting of 7-10 randomly selected participants), two in Madrid and two in Barcelona (characteristics are summarized in Table 1). The groups were labelled as FG1 and FG2 in Barcelona and FG3 and FG4 in Madrid. Composition by sex was broadly equal (17 women of a total of 33 participants). Employment status was varied, as were educational levels and professions, although we avoided great differences to facilitate a climate of dialogue. All the participants had contact with people from different cultures and nationalities. The nature of these relationships was varied: family members, neighbours, work colleagues and study mates.

Table 1: *Study sample*

Characteristics:	Persons aged 20 to 50 years, with both sexes represented almost equally (n=33, 16 men and 17 women)
Methodology:	Four focus groups, two in Barcelona (FG1 and FG2) and two in Madrid (FG3 and FG4)
Focus group production:	Video and audio recordings
Session length:	90 minutes
Location:	Hotel rooms in Barcelona and Madrid specially equipped for focus groups
Date:	15-17 July 2014

Used as the stimulus was a news story broadcast on Spanish Telecinco on 4 June 2012,[2] shortly after the first round of presidential elections in Egypt and before the final round that would decide the Presidency: the voters would choose between Mohammad Morsi and Ahmed Shafik, who had been Prime Minister during Mubarak's last months in power. The news story refers to the Maria TV television channel belonging to the al-Ummah satellite channel, which had been outlawed and censored several times since it first appeared in 2006. Maria TV, aimed at Muslim women, is presented exclusively by female journalists wearing the niqab. Broadcasting for six hours a day, its first transmission went out during Ramadan in 2012 (Batrawy 2012).

It appeared interesting to us to analyse a news story in which journalists (from Telecinco) referred to other journalists (from Maria TV). Furthermore, we previously reported research (Medina-Bravo, Rodrigo-Alsina & Guerrero-Solé 2016) into how the BBC, CNN and Telecinco presented the same news story on the emergence of the Egyptian Maria TV channel. One of our conclusions was that the report by Telecinco, which seemed to be approached from a gender perspective, transmits the perception that Muslim women are blissfully ignorant of their oppression by an ultraconservative religion. The phonetic strategies of the news presenter, the stereotyping of women who, moreover, have no voice (Torres 2009) and the fact that the women are not presented as journalists all would indicate that the Telecinco report, in the guise of a defence of women's rights, is nothing less than an exercise in 'patronizing Western patriarchy' (Coene and Longman, 2008), as widely denounced by leading Muslim feminists (Medina-Bravo, Rodrigo-Alsina, Guerrero-Solé, 2016).

After watching the news story, the participants were asked about their perceptions and the influence of the news story on their attitudes to the depicted scenario. Answers were classified in six categories, as a) news reporting (to assess the importance of the story in relation to the content of the news broadcast as a whole); b) intentionality and communicative impact (to determine if there was any communicative intent behind the news item); c) interpretive strategies (as used by the participants to interpret the news story); d) initial contradictions regarding niqab use by the Egyptian journalists; e) recourse to known cultural referents; and finally f) perceived lack of professional credibility.

Results

The participants' initial reaction to the televised news was negative, as they felt that the media approach encouraged confusion. In their critical reading of the information given in the news story, they criticized formal aspects of the coverage, such as the length of the broadcast. They also assumed that the news story had manipulative intentions — corroborating McGuire's (1986) conclusions about the persistence of the myth of the strong manipulative effects of the media. Interestingly, when evaluating the news story, the participants showed themselves to be conscious of their own interpretive processes and aware of the difficulty of understanding elements from a culture other than their own.

a) News reporting

The participants were able to assess the importance of the story in relation to the content of the news broadcast as a whole. That is, they perceived the little importance attached by Telecinco to the information [*I think that ... it can't be very, very important ... we know that when there is a more important story they report ... more ...* (FG4)]. There was thus a co-textual evaluation of the time allocated to this news story in comparison to other stories. This formal aspect, however, also required an assessment of the news story content. Since the piece was very short, lasting only 30 seconds [*It's very brief.* (FG4)], it was perceived as a biased story with little content [*They don't give all the information, it is biased.* (FG2)]. The fact that the news story referred to a cultural reality distant from the experiences of Spanish audiences probably accentuated the perception of insufficient information. Participants also noted that the protagonists were not given a voice [*The women didn't speak, they said nothing ...* (FG1)]. Recall that, in the news story, the opinion of the Egyptian journalists was only provided in an indirect manner, when the newsreader said that these women "do not consider themselves to be ultraconservative, but quite progressive …" This statement distanced the channel from the journalists' self-attribution of progressiveness.

To sum up, the participants, in assessing the journalistic quality of the content, noted the low priority given to the story and questioned its brevity and the lack of information. The participants also highlighted the fact that the Egyptian journalists, as the central characters in the news story, were not used as direct sources. In their interpretations, the participants also called into question the communicative intentions of the television channel.

b) Intentionality and communicative impact

Some participants, wondering why they were being provided with certain information, raised questions about the pragmatics of communication. What is the communicative intent behind a specific news item? What are the intended effects on the viewer? The focus group participants were very critical in terms of detecting manipulative intent [*This news is for manipulation, that's clear* (FG4)]. Manipulation was signalled by both the brevity of the news story [*What I see is certainly manipulation, because of how long the news lasted.* (FG2)] and the simplistic, negative perspective given on the protagonists[*They cannot leave the house, they say. Then they are really manipulating you. That's what you remember.* (FG2)]. The story inspired distrust: it was seen as biased and manipulative and as seeking to cause a certain impact on viewers [*This generates hate.* (FG2)]. Viewers felt that the television channel had the clear intention of inculcating a negative view of Islamic culture and religion [*It gives you the feeling that it wants to turn you against the religion or the culture ...* (FG4)]. The focus group participants thus detected the kind of Islamophobia that has been documented by various studies.

Thus, for the most part, the focus group participants agreed that the information provided aimed to project a negative view of Islam and that this was a manipulative strategy. However most of the focus group participants themselves had a negative opinion of the Egyptian journalists' use of the niqab and of Islam in general.

c) Interpretive strategies

Several interesting issues arose when the focus group participants discussed their interpretations of the news story. Firstly, they noted the limits of their own interpretative abilities; secondly, they outlined their strategies for attributing meaning to their interpretations; and finally, they were aware of the cultural polysemy of the news story in question.

The participants could perceive that they had insufficient background knowledge to fully understand the narrative [*There is not enough information on why they do all that.* (FG4)]. A viewer's cultural competence is obviously limited to cultures of which he or she has some knowledge. Perceptions of the limits on interpretative possibilities is significant because it reflects a concern to find a meaning beyond the news story itself. Being aware of a certain level of cultural ignorance in interpreting news about other cultures seems to encourage more cautious interpretations. For the focus group participants, the information lacking in the story [*More contextualized in Egyptian society.* (FG2)] had to do mainly with the social context. This reveals an interesting perspective: one needs to have adequate information about the society in which a practice originates in order to attribute meaning to cultural practices (understood as the manifestation of patterns or traditional practices developed within specific cultures).

As for interpretive strategies, audiences need to find meaning, based on their own knowledge, in what is described. A comment about seeing women wear miniskirts in Morocco [*I've been to Morocco and I've seen how society is changing a lot and in Marrakech you see girls in miniskirts ...* (FG1)] reveals how people tend to resort to familiar referents in order to assimilate media information about an unknown cultural reality. Obviously, Moroccan society is not Egyptian society — but they tend to be lumped together since Moroccan society is the reality of which the participant has direct knowledge and which is considered to be similar to the news story context. Obviously, a viewer's cultural background is what will allow a more or less complex reading and interpretation of the news. Direct knowledge of Egyptian society would allow other readings — and the focus group participants did, in fact, show awareness of this cultural polysemy.

Some focus group participants were aware that multiple views and interpretations of reality are possible and also that the intended recipient of the story in question was the Spanish public [*We see this news from our point of view, which is more secular, more progressive. And they have an interpretation of the Koran (...) we see it all from a very secular viewpoint. And this news from Telecinco, what they want is this impact on us* (FG2)]. The participants thus revealed an awareness of an inevitable cultural polysemy in the news. The interpretive focus and the cultural viewpoint on which a news story is based determine the meaning attributed to a particular cultural practice. Outsiders may see a cultural practice as surprising and exotic, while insiders will view it as commonplace and everyday. We also see self-attribution of a secular, enlightened view that opposes Koranic interpretations: recall that the Egyptian women journalists self-defined themselves as progressive. Also, as was mentioned earlier, the focus group participants clearly understood the communicative intention of the news story. The intended audience was Spanish viewers, who may have found the information shocking, as pointed out above by a focus group participant. As Baker (1999: 10) observed, audiences are aware of the polysemic nature of news stories, with different cultures making different interpretations and even experiencing different effects.

d) Initial contradictions regarding niqab use by the Egyptian journalists

The immediate reactions of the focus group participants were of respect for the decision to wear the niqab as a choice made by the professionals themselves [*They choose themselves to be like that* (FG2)]. However, it is clear that this interpretation was based on the information given by the broadcaster (These women "do not consider themselves to be ultraconservative, but quite progressive …"). It is interesting to see how different participants 'accept' this proposal to varying degrees [*If they want to wear it they should wear it, but it's a very good thing that they are liberated, that they leave the home and have those concerns* (FG3)].However, an internal contradiction immediately becomes apparent: [*If a girl wants to be a journalist, what's the problem? Why is this not viewed positively in their country?* (FG3)]. The second question [*Why is this not viewed positively in their country?*] is an interesting example of stereotyping as the viewer tries to interpret a story that raises questions. In this case, the stereotypical view of a sexist Muslim world emerges (Martin Muñoz 2010; Torres 2009) that is also backward in contrast to a modern, egalitarian Western world (Runnymede Trust 1997). The paternalistic view identified by Coene and Longman (2008) is thus confirmed.

The initial comments that attempted to posit use of the niqab as a personal choice made by the journalists were accompanied by a certain degree of disorientation and confusion [*It's hard to understand, but so are all religions ...* (FG4)], giving way, little by little, to reluctance to accept this idea. What emerges is that wearing the niqab could not possibly be a matter of free will.

The participants perceive that most women are forced to wear the niqab, although some say that the choice as to wear it or not must be respected [*For me it merits respect because it is true that there are many people who agree to be like that, and it merits respect, what I do not agree with is that people who do not want to are forced.* (FG4)]. But the interpretation that finally emerges is that wearing the niqab is not an exercise in free will, as was suggested at the beginning of the discussion. Following the rhetoric of salvation (Abu-Lughod 2013), the idea that a woman would freely choose to wear the niqab is denied, as the women were likely to continue to be manipulated by society [*And behind that there is that, well, that they go on television? Because if they keep being manipulated, they will continue to be coerced and really it won't serve any purpose, because they will not be able to express anything other than what the men decide and ... the politicians decide* (FG4)]. The participants thus expressed their opinion that having their own television programme did not alter the situation and social status of the women journalists (Conway 2012).

The focus group participants questioned the alleged freedom of the journalists, suggesting that these women may have uncritically internalized the gender inequality presumed to be a general feature of Muslim countries. This questioning can be seen as an example of the way in which the West silences Muslim women (Badran 2012) — there is no suggestion that the opinions of the women in question should be heard. The participants subsequently started to broaden the scope of their interpretations, asserting that, if these women did not wear the niqab they could be "mistreated or worse" [*It's kind of like, yes, its a small step, but things over there are terrible. Yes, there are people who want to wear the niqab but there are also lots of others who do so because everyone does it and if they don't they may be mistreated or worse.* (FG3)]. This "or worse" reflects perceptions of a wide range of potential dangers that remained undefined.

Of course, the focus group discussions did not always follow the same pattern. It is worth noting that for FG4, use of the niqab was interpreted, from the outset and almost unanimously, as an exercise in violence and repression that could not be accepted or respected. The journalists' referral to themselves as progressive at the end of the news story was questioned [*In their culture, maybe yes, that's progressive, but in our culture, no*. (FG4)], as was the idea that the niqab could represent an act of liberation and progress for the journalists [*For me, for example, it made me laugh that this was like, something of a triumph, the fact that they show their eyes* (FG4)]. The view that the niqab is a symbol of coercion and repression was also discussed. This stereotypical view of the niqab as a symbol of the oppression of Muslim women [*It's not the clothes, it's much more than that* (FG4); *Also, you know what's behind this? A lot of repression, of fear...* (FG4)] has been questioned in works by Ali (2003), Badran (2012) and Rasmussen (2013).

e) Recourse to known cultural referents

It is interesting to see how participants look for familiar cultural referents to help them interpret cultural expressions they do not understand. One participant compared the niqab to a Christian nun's habit [*... because they practice their religion freely and that is their attire, like nuns here ...* (FG4)]. Another participant considered the news story in terms of a past Spain [*Really it seems fine to me, because I feel that it's like what happened here, my grandmother had to sit in the back of the church with her knees covered a metre away from the men* (FG3)].

The construction of alterity inevitably involves a comparison that derives from the viewer's own identity. This gives rise to the parallels drawn by our study participants with a less liberated, less modern Spain in the past. As Contractor (2012) and Said (1997) have warned, this mechanism of comparison reinforces the image of a modern and egalitarian West versus an historically backward Muslim world [*Here we have progressed and it seems like there are some small changes, that women are starting to drive and there is slightly more equality between men and women, but here there's more.* (FG3)].

f) Perceived lack of professional credibility

All the focus groups reflected on the fact that a journalist whose face cannot be seen could only be perceived as lacking credibility. Seeing only the eyes of a journalist inspired a lack of trust and a perception of non-transparency. It is important to bear in mind the importance of non-verbal communication in newsreaders in Spain [*Not seeing their faces, regardless of the clothes they wear… but to me the eyes, face, gestures, they communicate a lot, and then to not see her eyes or face ... For me, this causes a lack of trust.* (FG2)]. Simply wearing the niqab denied any credibility to the Egyptian journalists [*It is more than the story or what they're going to say ... These people cannot come out and say anything important because dressed like that … you want to know who is speaking … For me personally, when I'm talking to a person or they are addressing me I like to see their faces* (FG4)]. No matter what they said, dressed in the niqab, the journalists were not viewed as credible, so their professional work as journalists was completely discredited. We can conclude that any story or stance that is communicated by a woman in the niqab will be rejected.

Conclusion

Many media messages about other cultures are based on the image of an inferior other, a deteriorated alterity (Allen 2010; Beck 2012; Sen 2007; Said 1975). Instead of focusing on elements that encourage integration (Berry 1997), media stories often start from a fixed, adversarial position: there is a "we" in opposition to a "they". In interpreting media discourse, audiences appropriate messages in sense described by Thompson: "to appropriate a message is to take its meaningful content and make it one's own (...) In appropriating a message we adapt it to our own lives and life contexts" (Thompson 1998: 66).

In our study, focus group participants detected a manipulative attitude on the part of the media. They criticized both the lack of information, which prevented them from making a correct assessment of the situation, and the ethnocentrism and Islamophobia inherent in the story. We found it quite remarkable that the participants were so critical, not just of the news story itself, but also of the communicative intentions of the channel in terms of producing a certain impact. They therefore demonstrated their capacity as viewers to assess the journalistic product, how information was presented and even the reasons behind this presentation. Viewers' perception of their own ignorance in interpreting unfamiliar cultural practices (understood as the manifestation of patterns or traditional practices developed within specific cultures) is also significant, most especially their awareness of the interpretive polysemy of their own cultural perspective on news stories. We could say that the viewers made an opposing interpretation (Hall 1993) that questioned the interpretation of the television channel.

The question remains, however, as to whether viewers are really capable of opposing the media message when called on to do so by reality, or whether they simply end up accepting the dominant discourse (Gripsrud 1999; Hall 1993; Jensen 1999). This is where our results demonstrate a difficulty in resolving internal contradictions: most focus group participants ended up abandoning any self-critical stance in favour of sharing the viewpoint offered by the media.

Ultimately, the participants' views harked back to the stereotypes criticized in the Runnymede report (1997), referred to earlier in this paper. Thus, a recurring image of a backward Muslim society versus a liberated, progressive West emerged time and again. Our focus group participants gave no indication that the discussion on media manipulation led them to reflect on how the media's construction of images influenced their interpretation.

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[1] The word hijab comes from the Arabic word hajaba, meaning 'hide' or to 'conceal'. Sometimes referred to as 'veiling', nowadays the hijab refers generally to the modesty or demureness of veiled Muslim women. In a narrow sense, it is also the name for the scarf that Muslim women wear on their heads. The niqab is a veil covering the face except the eyes, which some Muslim women wear as an elegant form of the hijab. It is particularly popular in the Middle East, but is also used in North Africa, Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The burqa, often called the full or Afghan burka, is a garment that entirely covers the body and face.

[2] Telecinco: https://youtu.be/ViNrTN889Bw. The text is as follows (translated from Spanish): 'Egyptians will be seeing something on television that was unthinkable during the Mubarak period. Very soon, a channel presented by fully veiled women will start broadcasting. They will appear, as you can see, wearing the niqab, a garment that only permits — and just barely — the presenters' eyes to be seen. They do not consider themselves to be ultraconservative, rather as quite progressive, as tradition compels them to stay at home.'