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Chapter 15

Inescapable News Coverage: Media Influence on Lessons About Islam

Abstract: For a long time, stories about terrorism, conflicts, and controversies, which are in various ways put in connection with Islam and Muslims, have been a prominent part of Norwegian news coverage. Based on a case study of a Norwegian secondary school, the current chapter deals with the ways in which the news coverage, and themes, events, and discourses contained in it, come to be included in religious education about Islam. Using the concepts of prototypes and cognitive frames, it is argued that the news coverage establishes and maintains certain associations and narratives connected to Islam. Due to the frequent and substantial use of media materials in RE classrooms, influencing the ways Islam is represented and talked about in the classroom, the same problematic issues are thematized over and over again in similar ways across the observed classes. By constantly addressing the news coverage with the intention of nuancing and correcting problematic representations of Islam, the result may in some instances be to reinforce and confirm the association of Islam with terrorism, conflict, and controversy established by the media.

Keywords: religious education, Islam, frames, news coverage, terrorism

15.1 Introduction

Anne Lise¹ is an experienced religious education teacher. Still, she is uncertain about how to teach about Islam. The question is how, and if, she should relate her lessons about Islam to terrorism and conflict. It is not really a part of the curriculum, and yet it seems relevant, especially with the constant coverage in the news media. ‘Conflict and Islam, that’s the elephant in the room,’ she tells me. ‘That’s what all the students think about when they hear the word “Islam”, but they are reluctant to say it.’ This year, as she has done in previous years, she thus introduces the topic of Islam by going through several news pieces about terrorism and radical Islamism. In this way, she hopes to break the ice so that they can discuss it and can confront any prejudices about Islam and Muslims that the students may have from their exposure to the news media.

¹ All names of informants are changed.
After the class had their last lesson about Islam, she showed me an evaluation note from one of the Muslim students. The note said: ‘I think there has been too much focus on radicalization and extreme Islam. Islam is so big and contains so many exciting things. Where is all this?’ ‘This was what I was trying to avoid,’ Anne Lise said. ‘I tried to show them that Islam is not just about the things they learn from the media, but yet, that’s the impression they’re left with.’

The scene above illustrates one of the dilemmas that religious education (RE) teachers in upper secondary school face when teaching about Islam. Should they focus mainly on the curricular goals of the subject, or should they spend time on the many controversial issues that feature in the news media where conflict and terror are recurring themes? This chapter explores some of the ways the perceived massive and conflict-oriented news coverage of Islam both influences, and becomes part of, the pedagogic practices of RE lessons.

The material is approached using a mediatization perspective. Mediatization theory (Hjarvard 2013) gives a framework through which to understand media influence without positing a direct and determinant effect of the media on audiences’ behaviour and opinions (see Chapter 3). Rather, the influence of the media comes from the ways in which various media become integrated into the practices of other societal institutions, thus altering and conditioning the said practices (Thorbjørnsmrød, Figenschou, and Ihlen 2014). Chapters 13 and 14 discuss how media technology, platforms, and materials² form an integral part of the RE lessons observed, and how this impacts on the engagement with, and representation of, religion in the classroom.

This chapter will focus on the lessons about one specific religion, Islam. RE lessons about Islam offer an interesting case for exploring media influence. In most instances such an influence may be subtle and difficult to observe and isolate. However, in relation to Islam, the influence of the media on the pedagogical practice is explicit. All the teachers³ in the case study on which this chapter reports are aware of, and admit to, being strongly influenced by the media when teaching about Islam. The observations show that media discourses, as well as events, debates, and topics that are covered in various news media, play a prominent role in lessons about Islam. All the teachers chose to address controversial issues like terrorism and extreme Islamism in their lessons, making the lessons about Islam very different from their lessons on other religions. Several lessons, in most of the classes I observed (see Chapter 13), were spent talking about how

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² See Chapter 14 for a description of the multifaceted aspects of media-presence in the classroom.
³ And many students too.
Islam appears in the news, with the explicit aim of nuancing and correcting what was perceived to be a negative and one-sided representation.

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

1. How do the teachers relate to the news coverage of Islam, and how does it influence the pedagogical choices that they make when planning and executing lessons about Islam?

2. In what ways can the news coverage of Islam be said to condition and influence the ways in which Islam is being represented, discussed, and talked about in the classroom?

This approach presupposes two levels of possible influence:

a) Indirect level: where the teachers take their perception of media influence into account when planning the lessons, and

b) Direct level: through the ways teachers and students engage with questions about Islam in the classroom.

Using the concepts of prototypes and cognitive frames, I will argue that a too linear and straight-forward understanding, among the teachers, of the effects of the news coverage on the students may in some instances lead to the reinforcement and confirmation of the very notion that is seen to be problematic – namely, the association of Islam with terrorism, conflicts, and controversies.

The empirical data for this chapter were gathered as part of a case study of an upper secondary school in the Eastern part of Norway. The study included the direct observation of a total of 50 RE sessions in eight classes, interviews with six RE teachers, as well as observations from, and notes taken during, informal conversations and meetings with the teachers. The fieldwork was conducted during the school year 2015–2016, with the majority of observations being conducted between October 2015 and March 2016. The observations were recorded as handwritten field notes. No audio/video recordings were made.⁴ As detailed in Chapter 13, RE in Norway is organized as a mandatory non-confessional subject that is aimed at all students, regardless of their religious/non-religious background. The subject is called ‘Religion and Ethics’ in upper secondary schools, and is described as being both knowledge-based and value-forming. It has the explicit aim of promoting tolerance across religious, philosophical and ethical boundaries (UDIR 2006).

⁴ See Chapter 3 for a more detailed description of the data material and methodological considerations.
15.2 The Conditions for Teaching About Islam

As mentioned above, the lessons about Islam that were observed differed strongly from the lessons about the other religions and worldviews. When teaching about Islam, controversies, conflicts, and potentially problematic sides of the religion were given significantly more attention than is specified by the learning outcomes of the curriculum. The notion that Islam is a controversial religion was explicitly communicated to the students, as in this example of Kari introducing Islam:

> We will start with some brainstorming about what you associate with Islam. Because Islam is a controversial religion. It is a religion that is talked and written about a lot. I hope you dare to say what you are thinking. (Kari’s lesson 5 November 2015)

In all the classes observed, terrorism and extremism were the main topic of several of the lessons. Much time was also devoted to controversial issues, like the veiling of women, the death penalty for homosexuality, infidelity or apostasy, religion as a problem for integration, the radicalization of youth, forced marriage, and the oppression of women, to name just a few. These topics were regularly thematized as part of the planned lessons, and were most often legitimized by referring to the news media as a way of showing their relevance. However, as often as not, the same themes surfaced during the course of lessons devoted to other topics, even when this was not planned. I will return to this latter point, but first we will examine how the teachers relate to the news coverage of Islam, and why the teachers find it necessary to include problematic issues that are covered in the news media when planning and executing their lessons.

As the introductory description of Anne Lise’s dilemma illustrates, the teachers are aware of, and constantly evaluate, the role given to conflict and controversy in lessons about Islam. They are all in agreement on one thing: the premises for teaching about Islam are very different from those of other religions and worldviews. The difference is ascribed to the role of the news media, and the ways in which stories about Islam are being covered and presented. Charlotte says:

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5 The curricular learning outcomes for Islam are identical to those for Buddhism. The differences in how the two religions are approached are thus interesting.
6 In seven of the eight observed classes, Islam was introduced with explicit references to controversial issues from the news.
7 In most classes, the teachers found it necessary to provide an explanation of why various controversies were thematized.
The media determine the focus, totally, at least when it comes to Islam. Less so when it comes to Christianity, in my experience... but in Islam the media influence the lessons one hundred percent. ... And when it comes to Islam, the students let themselves be moulded by the media to an unbelievable degree.

Although the other teachers are somewhat less categorical, they all agree that when teaching about Islam, news coverage is a factor that they have to take into consideration. The basic claim underlying the teachers’ perceived need to treat Islam differently from the other topics is that the news media are the most influential sources for the students’ knowledge about, and views on, Islam and Muslims. These conditions are not there in relation to other religions or topics in the subject, at least not to any comparable degree. This thus creates a unique situation in which the teachers experience all the students having at least some knowledge of Islam as it is represented through the news media. As Anne Lise put it: ‘I know that when students think about Islam, they think about what appears in the media.’ According to the teachers, the students are influenced by the amount of coverage, providing a steady influx of focus on Islam, but also the content of the coverage plays a role, being mainly centred on conflict and controversies. The knowledge the students have of Islam and Muslims is thus seen as problematic, and this needs to be addressed in the lessons.

### 15.3 Constant Coverage

The teachers claim that all the students are familiar with the media representations of Islam due to the sheer quantity of stories that are related to Islam in the news media.

Interviewer: Do they refer to news media?

Hanne: Yes, sometimes they do. When you talk about Islam, it is impossible to avoid all the news pieces about IS, or The Ummah of the Prophet, or Mullah Krekar. It is inescapable.

(Interview with Hanne, my emphasis.)

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8 Islamic State (IS) is the name that is most used in the Norwegian news media, but ISIS and ISIL are also used.

9 Norwegian radical Islamist group (Bangstad 2014, 65–69)

10 Najmuddin Faraj Ahmad aka Mullah Krekar is a well-known radical Islamist in Norway (Bangstad 2014, 63–65).
Several studies show that coverage of news stories relating to Islam has greatly increased in the last two decades (Niemelä and Christensen 2013, 14; Lundby and Gresaker 2015, 80). Even though religion, it must be said, is a marginal topic in the news (Lundby and Gresaker 2015), cases related to Islam seem to be over-represented in the Norwegian news media, if compared to the size of the Muslim population. This coverage seems to be constantly high (relative to other news pieces on religion), even in years that have no major events connected to Islam (IMDI 2010).

The teachers perceive, and describe, the coverage of Islam as being constant and intense. The news coverage of Islam is something encountered on a daily basis, as part of normal everyday life. This is frequently communicated in both the interviews and the lessons observed, for example, when Guro asks her students about what image from the media they meet on an everyday basis, or the students in a lesson talk about the effects of hearing about Islam ‘all the time’. News coverage related to Islam is thus seen as being part of the everyday background, something that the students encounter, and are exposed to, regularly.

This steady coverage is punctuated by short periods when there is massive coverage of terror attacks tied to radical Islamism. When these events occur, the teachers tell me, the students are both interested and active in acquiring information. In these periods they follow the news more closely. The episodes mentioned explicitly in the interviews are the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015 and the Bataclan attacks in Paris in November 2015.

I asked Kari if she thought the students were interested in the news.

Normally it varies. Now they’re really interested, but I have often thought that they are not really that interested. But it’s obvious now. And in January, with those murders in Paris. They were interested then.

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11 Statistics on religion are complex. Of a population of 5 million people, the Muslim population is somewhere between roughly 100,000 (based on membership in Muslim faith organizations) and 200,000 (based purely on the majority religion in their countries of origin; Sultan 2012).

12 I use the term radical Islamism/Islamist throughout this chapter, as these are the most common terms used, both in the classroom and in the Norwegian news media, to describe violent and extremist forms of Islamism. This use is not meant to suggest that radical Islamism necessarily entails endorsing violence.

13 This event happened during the fieldwork; two of the interviews were conducted after the attack.

14 Immediately after the November Paris attacks.
This interplay between a constant background of news stories about Islam, and the massive and recurring coverage of violent events thus ensures, again according to the teachers, that news media representations of Islam are well known among the students, to the point that this is all they know and think about when it comes to Islam.

### 15.4 Conflict-Centred Coverage

The coverage of Islam in the press has been quite well researched. So it is possible to get a clear picture both of the coverage now and also of the ways in which coverage has developed over time (e.g. Said 1981; Poole 2002; Døving and Kraft 2013). In many ways, the Norwegian coverage of Islam is becoming more nuanced. More voices are being heard and journalists are steadily improving their knowledge and understanding of the complexities of a world religion like Islam (Døving and Kraft 2013). The most basic underlying premise for coverage, however, still seems to be conflict in one form or another. Conflict is the main criterion when it comes to the choice of what stories should be covered (Lundby and Gresaker 2015), the framing of the stories (Bangstad 2011; Andersson et al. 2012), and even as an editorial criterion for what voices are being let into the debates through op-eds and the like (Lunde 2013).

In her seminal work on newspaper coverage of British Muslims in the late 1990s, Poole uses the notion of ‘news framework’ to analyse how portrayals of British Muslims are limited to a few recurring topics, which are then seen as being related (2002, 55). By looking at the main and secondary topics in the articles, as well as which topics were referred to in the articles, she identified a ‘clustering of topics that connotes several dominant symbolized meanings’ (83). These are mostly negative and connected to the question of whether Muslim immigrants are a threat to various aspects of the British society (2002, 83–84). Døving and Kraft show how this is also the case for Norwegian news coverage of Islam. A set of different topics are repeatedly presented together and are made part of the same framework in a way that makes them seem relevant to each other15 (2013, 147–148). Even though the coverage of Islam seems to have become more nuanced, old patterns and representations are being repeated and reproduced. One of these is of the Muslim fundamentalist who perpetrates

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15 The example used is how a discussion about whether a hijab may be worn as part of a police uniform may include themes like homosexuality, terrorism, and the power of Imams, without the relevance of these themes being questioned (Døving and Kraft 2013, 148).
acts of terrorism because of his faith (Poole 2002). The linkage of Islam to extremism, radicalization, and terror has been established in news coverage of Islam for a long time (Altheide 2007; Lundby and Thorbjørnsrud 2012, 99), and also well before 9/11 in 2001 (Lueg 1995). Representing faith as the main motivation for terror links international terrorism to potential terror in European countries due to immigration (Poole 2002, 70–71).

In 2015, the period in which most of the observations were conducted, the Norwegian news media paid a lot of attention to the conflict in Syria, both in itself and as the background for other stories. The refugee crisis resulting from the war didn’t just affect the adjacent countries, but also led to a large increase in the number of refugees arriving in Europe. The hazardous routes taken by the refugees, the response by European countries, and questions about integration and multiculturalism, made headlines throughout the year. The Islamist organization, IS, was also covered extensively. The establishment of a self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate in Syria and Iraq attracted attention, especially as IS attracted foreign warriors from around the world. Their harsh laws, brutal treatment of prisoners and civilians, as well as their skills in advertising themselves through various forms of digital media, made them the symbol of extremist Islamism worldwide. The link between IS, the recruitment of European foreign warriors to Syria, and the threat of terror from refugees, or at least from people masquerading as refugees, was also a recurring theme in the Norwegian news coverage.¹ Six

The Norwegian Islamist group The Ummah of the Prophet, gained much attention in this regard for supporting terrorist attacks, warning against attacks on Norwegian soil, and its involvement in the recruitment of foreign warriors to Syria (Bangstad 2014, 66).

The major concern, shared by all the teachers, is that the students have prejudices and negative sentiments towards Muslims. The teachers go far in assuming that the constant and conflict-centred media coverage shapes the way the students think about Islam and Muslims.

Guro: I think it’s important to challenge prejudices and established images, and do something about them.

Interviewer: Do you experience there being prejudices there [with the students]?

Guro: A lot! A lot, a lot, a lot.

¹ With the most explicit example perhaps being the Islam critical organization, Human Rights Service, which published an article saying that if Norway accepts 10,000 refugees, as many as 8,000 of them may be IS sympathizers (https://www.rights.no/2015/06/minst-8-000-is-sympatiserer-hentes-til-norge/; Accessed 6 April 2017).
As shown in Chapter 13, creating tolerance and understanding across religious boundaries is one of the main formulated goals for the subject ‘Religion and Ethics’. The teachers therefore emphasize that the prevention and countering of prejudices is an important part of the pedagogical mandate of RE in the first place. These teachers use words like ‘unavoidable’, ‘unnatural to omit’, and ‘necessary’ to describe why they need to address the issues covered in the news media. The underlying premise is that the association of Islam with terrorism, conflict, and controversy is already firmly established among the students, and this needs to be addressed, corrected, and nuanced, or the result will be that prejudices and a negative view of Islam and Muslims prevail.

15.5 Islam in the Classroom: Prototypes and Cognitive Frames

Anne Lise: OK, we’ll start on Islam. What do you think about when I say Islam?

Boy: Allah!

Anne Lise: Can you all come to the blackboard and write what you think about when I say Islam?

Some students stand up, most stay at their desks by their laptops.

There is a lot of unrest. As some write, others make jokes. A boy shouts, ‘Allahu Akbar!’ This evokes laughter from most of the class. Two boys talk quietly about the ‘Islamic state and terrorism’. I overhear another conversation between three students, about terrorism.

After a minute or so the students have written a list of words on the blackboard: Allah, mosque, IS, Shia and Sunni, kaba, Id, Eid Mubarak, hijab, The five pillars, and Ramadan.

A group of students discuss with the boy that wrote ‘IS’.

Boy: Are you sick?

Boy: It is the first thing I think about when I hear Islam.

Boy: And you call us racist when we joke about it?

Anne Lise brings the class to order again.

Anne Lise: These are the things you think about? How about the things portrayed in the media?

Boy: It’s propaganda.

Boy: Media portrays Islam as ... crazy people.

One boy says quietly to another: ‘Are you allowed to say that?’ He replies: ‘Well, it’s true.’

Anne Lise: How does this affect you?
Boy: Well it affects the way we see them, as dangerous people.

Girl: They focus on the terrorist part of Islam, the terrorist groups, and that’s all we get to see. So it all becomes very negative.

Anne Lise: Are you able to separate facts about Islam from the image created by the media? There are a lot of prejudices created about the religion of Islam, aren't there? We will watch a clip from YouTube.

Boy: [Interrupts] After the 22nd of July, several people though ...

Boy: Several Muslim people were beaten up.

Boy: So the first impression was that it was terror from Muslims.

(Anne Lise’s lesson, 22 September 2015)

This episode, among several similar observations, shows support for the teachers’ claims that terrorism is what the students think about when they hear the word Islam. The change in the class was sudden. At the start of the lesson they talked about dates for tests and holidays. However, immediately after Anne Lise introduced Islam, the mentions of terrorism surfaced. These were mainly jokey and within small groups, and were not addressed to the class as a whole, but they were loud enough for everybody to notice.

Two more things are worth noting. The first is that although terrorism was a theme among the students, this was in no way the only thing they thought about when they heard the word Islam. Several relevant terms were written on the blackboard, and the one item tied to terrorism (IS) was challenged internally by the students. The second point is that, at least in the full class discussion, most of the students show that they have a strong awareness of how the news media cover Islam. In fact, a lot of the students subscribe to the same view as the teachers. They hold that the media create prejudices and that the information you get from the media is one-sided at best. Most of the time, the students, with some exceptions, argued against the notion that terror and conflict were important aspects of Islam. The lack of negative claims and sentiments about Islam and Muslims was striking across all the classes,¹⁷ and a large variety of discourses and opinions were heard.

These observations suggest that the influence of the news media is complex. There is little support for describing the influence as a one-way effect that deter-

¹⁷ Of course, this does not mean that they necessarily don’t hold those views. They may be afraid to voice them, as the students are getting grades in the subject, and/or they may not want to appear to be prejudiced. They may be too ‘politically correct’ to voice their views, as Erik put it in one interview. Still, most students express opinions that challenge any such negative sentiments.
mines the students’ views on Islam and Muslims. As early as 1972, McCombs and Shaw problematized the power of the mass media to shape the way people think, arguing instead that the media’s ability to mentally order and organize our world for us is perhaps the most important media influence. They quoted Bernard Cohen’s assertion that the press ‘may not be successful ... in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about’ (Cohen 1963, quoted in McCombs and Shaw 1972, 177).

I propose to understand the observations through the two related concepts of prototypes and cognitive frames. I claim that the most important influence of the media coverage of Islam consists of:

a) Establishing and constantly reinforcing the association of the terms ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’ with extremism and terrorism, and

b) Establishing and maintaining cognitive frames which give us access to set ways of interpreting reality, but with room for conflicting views and discourses.

Using these two concepts provides us with a way to understand the classroom interaction, without having to make too far-reaching assumptions about what the students actually think, while still being able to account for the strong association that has been observed between Islam and terrorism, conflict, and controversies.

### 15.5.1 Prototypes

There is a tendency, rooted in our usual forms of expression, to think that the man who has learnt to understand a general term, say, the term ‘leaf’, has thereby come to possess a kind of general picture of a leaf, as opposed to pictures of particular leaves. (Wittgenstein undated, 30)

In his attempt to clarify what he saw as philosophical confusions, Wittgenstein made the observation that we don’t think in concepts that encompass all the essential properties of the term. This doesn’t mean that we’re not able to formulate common properties, but that the way we think about them is not in the form of general images. Rather, we tend to think by way of prototypes, where particular images come to mind when we think of a term, even though we know that the term often includes a lot of different varieties. Gullestad shows how prototypes played an important part in the Norwegian debates about immigration in the late 1990s. The example she used was how the prototypes for immigrants in Oslo at that time was ‘Muslim’ and ‘Pakistani’, even though this was not included in any
lexical definition of the word immigrant. Gullestad claims this enabled debaters to talk about immigrants in general, while it was obvious to anyone listening that they meant only a small and particular group of immigrants (2002, 89–90).

Several Muslim students said they felt that the image of the extremist/Muslim was present among all the other students. Furthermore, they seldom had alternative images of what the Muslim students called ‘ordinary Muslims’. This didn’t mean that their classmates equated ‘Muslims’ with ‘extremists’, but that the extremist/Muslim image was established as the first thing that sprang to mind.¹ This concurs with the teachers’ descriptions, that when students hear the word Islam, they think about what’s in the media (i.e. terror and conflict).

The strength of using the concept of prototypes in relation to this material is that it allows us to distinguish between a prototype and an opinion. Perhaps terrorism is the first thing most of the students think of when they hear the word ‘Islam’,² but this does not necessarily correlate with their opinions about Muslims. However, the prototype of the extremist/terrorist also seems to be connected to a wider range of concepts that are related to the threat of radical Islamism, both globally and locally.³ To account for this, I turn to the concepts of framing and cognitive frames.

15.5.2 Framing and Cognitive Frames

In media and communication studies, the concept of framing was developed as a tool for understanding media influence. According to Entman, frame analysis is helpful in examining the influence exerted by the ‘transfer (or communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel – to that [human] consciousness’ (1993, 51–52). Framing is to ‘select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicative text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described’ (ibid., 52). The theory of framing relies on the ways in which we make sense of the world

¹ This is discussed in a Norwegian article about the Muslim students’ views on RE about Islam (Toft, 2017).
² It even seems plausible that the teachers do the same.
³ For example, how the mention of IS was often followed by reference to terror in Europe, to fundamentalist interpretations of the Koran, to the oppression of women, or to immigration or refugees. Just as often, it was the other way around: a discussion of immigrants, gender roles, or the Koran might suddenly include mention of IS or the Taliban.
through cognitive frames, an insight that has been developed across a range of disciplines and fields. Fillmore, a linguist, gives this example:

Here is an example of a cognitive frame. There is in English, and presumably in every language spoken by people with a money economy, a semantic domain connected with what we might call the commercial event. The frame for such an event has the form of a scenario containing roles that we can identify as the buyer, the seller, the goods, and the money. ... Any one of the many words in our language that relate to this frame is capable of activating the whole frame. Thus, the whole commercial event scenario is available or ‘activated’ in the mind of anybody who comes across or understands any of the words ‘buy’, ‘sell’, ‘pay’, ‘cost’, ‘spend’, ‘charge’, etc., even though each of these highlights or foregrounds only one small section of the frame. (Fillmore 1976, 25)

Frames can be said to be cognitive toolkits, or symbolic–interpretative constructs, the main idea being that humans order experiences by relating them to already known patterns (Triandafyllidou and Fotiou 1998). As Fillmore puts it, framing is ‘the appeal, in perceiving, thinking, and communicating, to structured ways of interpreting experiences’ (1976, 20). We do not go around with every bit of information we possess in the foreground of our consciousness, but we make use of associations, schemata, and frames to understand and interpret what’s going on around us (Goffmann 1973).

According to Entman, this is also the case in conversations, and even in thinking (1993). Frames are activated by coming across words that form part of the frame, and a frame often has a set of central concepts that will activate the frame for the listener. Frames can be individual, and different people can use a wide variety of frames (Scheufele 1999), but there are often a stock of commonly invoked frames in social groupings, the culture, an empirically demonstrable set of common frames that are exhibited in the discourse and thinking of most of the people in a social grouping (Entman 1993, 53).

Using the concept of cognitive frames provides us with a way to understand how different themes and words are being grouped together in ways that make them relevant to each other. Perhaps more importantly, the activation and application of a frame does not necessarily determine the discourses or opinions of the people using them.
15.5.3 The ‘Radical Islamist’ Frame

I propose that the ‘radical Islamist’ (RI) frame\textsuperscript{21} is such a commonly invoked frame, established by the news media as the dominant source of information about events around the world, but, more importantly, maintained and reinforced by a constant reactivation of the frame on a (more or less) daily basis. The frame revolves around the radical Islamist, a person or group, who wants to establish a state under Islamic rule that is guided by the Sharia and is modelled on the Caliphate of the first generations after Muhammad. The radical Islamist is prepared to use violence, and sees terrorism as part of the Jihad, the holy war against the unbelievers (most often the West), and is willing to die as a martyr. The radical Islamist is a threat to Europe (and Norway), as we already have a Muslim population among which some, or many, may be radical Islamists, or may potentially be recruited by charismatic mosque leaders or extremist groups, either globally or locally, and as refugees from Muslim areas, some may sympathize with the Islamists, and some may be sent here under cover. I do not argue that other frames are not in play, but the RI frame provides a comprehensive way of interpreting and making sense of the ways in which different topics and terms were clustered and brought up in the classroom.

15.6 The Prototype and the Radical Islamist Frame in Play

As seen in the above select examples, and as several other observations confirm, the mention of Islam seems to raise the prototype of the terrorist immediately in the classroom, resulting in different discussions within the radical Islamist (RI) frame. For example, the cry of ‘\textit{Allahu Akbar}’ was jokingly uttered by a student, who was imitating the stereotypical terrorist, just as talk of suicide bombs and the hijacking of planes occurred often, and discussion, and mentions of IS took place in most of the classes observed. Even more striking was the way that class discussions about very different topics soon begin to follow the same patterns and to include similar references and themes. I will give one example in which the teacher activates the RI frame, whereupon this impacts upon the lesson’s content.

\textsuperscript{21} Constructed here as a heuristic device to account for patterns observed in the data.
Kari starts a brainstorming session to find out what the class associates with Islam. The class responds with ‘the Koran’, ‘Allah’, ‘the five pillars’, ‘Shia and Sunni’, ‘mosque’, and ‘Muhammad’. As they suggest words, Kari writes them on the blackboard. They move quickly through the words until a boy says ‘sharia’.

Kari: Yes, what is sharia?

Boy: Isn't that rules?

Kari wipes away some of the words, rearranging the space around ‘sharia’.

Kari: I need more space if we are to write more about sharia.

Boy: I thought it was a court of law.

Kari: I think you wanted to say more?

Boy: Haram.

Girl: And halal.

Kari: But sharia? What is that? Someone asked about it, but it sort of stopped there.

Noora, one of the Muslim girls, starts talking about the sources of sharia and the Four Schools of Law. After a short while, Kari takes over.

Kari: And there is a lot of discussion about whether to use it or not.

Boy: Use where?

Kari: There are some countries that use it, and some of the laws are a bit ... She hesitates, and flips through the textbook.

Kari: We can turn to page 156 in the textbook.

This page is about Islamism and the question of whether a society should be based on Islamic law and sharia.

Kari: So Islamists want to spread sharia in society, that society should be based on sharia. And then there’s the hudud punishments, they have drawn a lot of attention. They are detailed on the next page. ‘That theft shall be punished by the amputation of the hand.’

The students are shocked by this, and soon the discussion turns to how Muslims in Norway relate to the hudud punishments and to Norwegian laws and values. Most of the class agrees that it does not represent a danger to Norwegian society, as Norwegian Muslims don’t generally want sharia rule in Norway.

(Kari’s lesson 5 November 2015)

This example illustrates a typical pattern that was observed across classes. A central concept of Islam – in this case, sharia – comes up. For Kari, this activates the RI frame and consequently also the concern for what the students might think about what she sees as a potentially controversial issue. As the class carries on with the brainstorming, Kari finds it important to halt and expand on
this, and it doesn’t take long before the topics are the hudud-punishments and radical Islamists. Similar situations occurred in both Anne Lise’s and Hanne’s classes. In Anne Lise’s case, her lesson about the ethics of Islam turned into a discussion about the hudud punishments in less than five minutes. Hanne saw the need to include a long session on the hudud punishments, with reference to IS, in her lessons on different voices in the Norwegian media debates. The same pattern was observed in lessons about gender and gender roles, an important curricular aim in relation to all religions. In all eight classes observed, the discussions included references to Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Taliban and IS, as well as the question of whether Norwegian Muslims oppressed women because of their interpretations of the Koran.

This sweeping use of examples may give the impression that all of the lessons about Islam were about radical Islamism and terror. I have to stress that this was not the case at all. Although this was something that was often the theme of lessons, most focused on other aspects of Islam. However, one of the points illustrated is how easy any topic could almost seamlessly include elements from the RI frame.

²²

In the example, above, we can also see how different frames can be applied and contested. The central question is not ‘What is sharia?’ rather, it is ‘What do we, in this context, see sharia as an example of?’ There are, at least, three different interpretations in play in this example:
1) The object of the lesson is brainstorming about central terms related to Islam. Sharia is one of several such terms. (Most of the students)
2) The object is defining sharia as a concept and its sources. (Noora)
3) The object is the debate about the implementation of sharia-based laws. (Kari)

Once the object of the lesson is settled by Kari, the RI frame is activated for most of the students, turning the debate into one mainly about Islamism.

15.7 Media Influence

Returning to the question of media influence, there seem to be reasons for saying that there is a significant influence of the news media on the lessons about Islam. However, this influence is multifaceted. The most obvious influence of

²² Most of these transitions felt natural and relevant in the classroom situation, as they did to me as an observer.
the news media on RE about Islam in the material observed is the way the teachers take the media coverage into account when planning their lessons, and this is manifested in altered pedagogical practices. This influence is dynamic and complex, though. The teachers actively choose how to relate to the news media in the classroom, remediating, nuancing, and, on several occasions, challenging and negating the content, claims, and views expressed in various media. We thus do not see a situation where the news media determine the way Islam is being represented in the classroom; rather, we see teachers consciously planning their lessons with a basis in pedagogical reasons that agree with the aims and mandate of RE to counter possible negative sentiments and prejudices towards Islam and Muslims created by the media coverage. This revolves around their assumption that all students associate Islam with terrorism, a notion that seems plausible, based on the observations in this study. We do not, however, find support for the assumption that the majority of the students have strong prejudices, and that their opinions are determined by the news media. Rather we see a large range of claims, discourses and opinions about Islam and Muslims, many of them in opposition to the perceived negative media coverage.

I have argued that the way the news media establish and maintain frames influences the classroom in several ways. Even though the media are currently becoming more nuanced in their coverage and make room for a wider range of voices in relation to Islam, established patterns and clusterings of topics are still repeated and reproduced. Maintained by a continuous stream of low key coverage of different stories put into this frame, this seems to influence the classroom scene. Everyone is familiar with the frame and thus the teachers’ need to address this is warranted.

However, this also means that constantly thematizing terrorism and radical Islamism in the lessons about Islam strengthens the perceived relevance of the frame, as well as the terrorist prototype, even when explicitly saying that Islam and terrorism aren’t closely connected. Lakoff, in a book aimed at liberal politicians in the US, offers an important insight for those wishing to influence the opinions of others. Words are defined relatively to frames. ‘When we negate a frame, we evoke the frame. ... When you are arguing against the other side, do not use their language. Their language picks out a frame – and it won’t be the frame you want’ (Lakoff 2014, 19). Even though the intention behind talking about how media coverage of Islam is centred on conflict and terrorism is to show that this is not a fair representation of Islam, the result is to confirm that this is the most relevant and important thing to discuss when learning about Islam. In this regard it seems that the RE lessons about Islam actually work in synergy with the news media. In some cases, the school even strength-
ens the frame, by making aspects of it an important part of the pedagogical practice.

Bibliography


