

Article

Creating Interstitial Spaces: Muslim Network Organizations in the United Kingdom

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Received: 10 June 2020; Accepted: 24 June 2020; Published: 30 June 2020



Abstract: This contribution describes the origin and activities of three organizations in the United Kingdom: the British Association for Islamic Studies (BRAIS), the Muslims in Britain Research Network (MBRN) and Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), discussing them against the backdrop of a dominant government-led securitization agenda. Having each held leading positions in one of these initiatives, the authors analyze the attempts of these organizations to endorse bonds and bridges between stakeholders at universities, community-based organizations and media, in order to combat distorted views on Islam and Muslims in current British society. Constructive work has taken place as they created new interstitial spaces in which stakeholders have conversed and benefitted from each other's insights. At the same time, these interstices are being constricted in such a way that the new spaces risk being squeezed by the 'agenda of misrecognition', a defensive closed fist. Based on their experiences, the authors define a possible agenda to consolidate the interstitial spaces that these organizations have managed to occupy.

Keywords: agenda of misrecognition; British Islam; interstices; media; community-based organisations

1. Introduction

The cultural imagination of Britain is comprised of many ideas, images and practices that combine post-colonial, British, European and diasporic ideas. If we want to describe the ways in which Islam is thought about, studied, and also misrecognized, the metaphor of a hand comes up. When the fingers are stretched out in friendship, there are interstitial spaces, spaces between the fingers metaphorically speaking, for development and outreach. However, these interstitial spaces are being constricted under influence of a climate of fear that security and secular life are under threat. In this case, the proffered hand of greeting, however conditional, becomes clenched into a fist and the interstitial spaces between the fingers are compromised and squeezed out by tension (Heath-Kelly 2013). Discussion is becoming constrained and freedom of expression generally is being chilled (except online where it can be viciously heated). A complicating shadow above the hand is the securitization agenda, which has created a surveillance culture.

Three main areas are relevant in our discussion here: Islamic Studies as taught in universities; Islamic theology as taught in madrasas, mosques and *dar al-ulooms*, and Muslim activist grassroots movements that seek to empower British Muslim citizens. They all take certain stances to Islam, which might misrepresent Islam as a universal existential problem (universities), or present Islam as the answer to everything (mosques). All are challenged to respond to media (mis)representations of Islam.

Although within these areas—the campus, the mosque and the media—there is a rich cornucopia of varied and some excellent practice, few opportunities are taken or created for links between them, by sharing, disseminating or cross-fertilizing. In this contribution, we will argue how in recent years

major opportunities have arisen for bonding (within one's group) and bridging (to other groups), as Bourdieu's social capital theory describes it (Field 2008). Below, we will reflectively analyze the actual, possible and desirable bonds and bridges that are available for the study of Islam, and the participation of Muslims, given the policing of interstitial spaces.

We will take three prominent examples of innovative cooperation to discuss this matter: the British Association for Islamic Studies (BRAIS Website n.d.), the Muslims in Britain Research Network (MBRN Website n.d.) and Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND Website n.d.). These organizations attempt to create a new discourse and to bring the different voices together from academics, from religious leaders and from communities. In their different ways, each organization opens discussion that crosses between and within academic, theological and community-based debates and influences their responses to secularism and to the surveillance culture.¹

We will take our own experiences regarding these three organizations as important resources for our argument. Each of us worked to achieve certain goals within these organisations and occupied various insider or outsider positions, depending on the context. However, our self-reflexivity at that time did not include self-conscious data collection with a view to writing this paper, so this is work completed in hindsight, with the strength and weaknesses that retrospective consideration brings.

Our writing is shaped by the pragmatist and ethically sound approach we had to bring to the jobs we did. We do not attempt here to analyse the impact on community users of these organisations, which would be another project. We do comment on the impact of state agency. Having had leading positions as chair of MBRN (Scott-Baumann) or as leader of the research unit at MEND (Bunglawala), and board member of BRAIS (Scott-Baumann) we will demonstrate, on the one hand, that much good work takes place that addresses a discriminatory agenda of misrecognition directly and creates interstitial spaces for cross-fertilization between the campus, the mosque and the media (Scott-Baumann et al. 2020). On the other hand, we will argue how policing makes it harder for people to speak out in ways that challenge the hegemonic discourse that Islam is evil and that Muslims are already defined as both vulnerable and dangerous (Heath-Kelly 2013). Dialogical encounters between actors in civil society, represented here by the academy and Muslim civil society organisations, and the state, whose focus on security and surveillance of Muslim communities introduces a tension within and between these parts, influences the push and pull in interstitial spaces that determines the scope for interaction, discussion and collaboration; the opening and closing of the clenched fist. Further, we adopt the research findings of Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015) that, whilst a theological education is of great importance, many in the Muslim and non-Muslim population of Britain do not wish to become imams and, instead, seek through education to understand Islam and use those insights to work out how to live a good life together. The academy, therefore, offers an avenue to cultivating knowledge of Islam in wider society that has the potential to help resist the agenda of misrecognition and provoke demotic responses to prevailing negative stereotypes about Muslims as a threat to society. Thus, it is important to consider how far the three organizations we will examine reach into the general community.

We thus start from the recognition that these organizations work against the backdrop of what we could call a 'real war' and a 'proxy war'. We will demonstrate how these organizations conduct their events against the backdrop of both real and fake aggression levelled against them. The 'real war' is about challenging media misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims (MEND and MBRN) and facile public debates about the causes of radicalization and terrorism (CAGE Website n.d.) and about replacing them with a positive narrative. The 'proxy war' is about battling the media as an echo chamber that seeks to legitimate Prevent-driven or state orchestrated interventions in public

¹ The British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) is a further subject association with a bearing on this area. Given that the body's primary area of engagement are institutions (academic and governmental), we have consciously omitted its inclusion in this paper.

debates about Islam, British Muslims, integration, identity and radicalization (Heath-Kelly 2013; Heath-Kelly 2017; Scott-Baumann 2017).

Below, we will therefore first introduce the British Association for Islamic Studies (BRAIS), the Muslims in Britain Research Network (MBRN) and Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND). We will elaborate upon the capacity for growth and cross-fertilization in these three pathways and demonstrate to what extent BRAIS, MBRN and MEND have been successful in attempting to create a new reality in which university, mosque and media converse and benefit from each other's insights.

Secondly, we will give a short account of how they became visible as Muslim activist organizations in policy discourses relating to the securitization agenda. Muslim organizations whose stated primary functions are championing the rule of law, due process and equality of all citizens, regardless of faith, find themselves paradoxically caught between a policy discourse that places a premium on these values as embodiments of 'integration' and 'Britishness' while simultaneously marginalizing British Muslim voices that challenge the subversion of these values by the state through securitization policies. This 'visibility' of purported shared values but discordant voices informs the dialogical tension created and channeled through interstitial spaces. Moreover, the amplification of these discordant voices in creative tension is allied to asymmetries of power, between state, civil society and media, which render interstitial spaces both functional and necessary. We will particularly look at the activities undertaken by MEND (and to a lesser extent in this paper, CAGE Website) to answer the question about the differentiation between the 'real war' and the 'proxy', as they contend with threats and challenges to their legitimacy and political agency.

In considering how the Muslim scholar's voice and presence is already and may increasingly be engaged in these various contestations of voice and authenticity, we propose that understanding Islam is a critical responsibility of all Muslims, so that work undertaken with all interested participants is precious.² We will also consider whether such organizations can both create and occupy interstitial spaces between and among their own various parts and how each content and its interstitial space can be better understood and developed in constructive tension with the others. We will end with some suggestions that will be helpful in making these interstices bigger than a handshake and create structural frames that will survive.

Three premises serve to explain the way forward in this current febrile climate of suspicion. The first premise is that strong civil society organizations are needed to marshal counterarguments in order to challenge the prevailing public and policy discourse about Islam and British Muslims. We will argue that Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) has taken up this task. This may sound reactive, which is true, yet it also makes possible a richer conversation about 'othering', about difference and about racism than would not be possible if prevalent discriminatory language were to go unchallenged.

The second premise is that academics are an important influence in reporting upon, supporting and deriving benefit from strong civil society organizations. We will argue that this happens especially through subject associations such as BRAIS (based mainly in universities) and hybrid entities like MBRN and MEND as they facilitate knowledge exchange by bringing together academics and community-based organizations.

The third premise is that the cultural imagination of British civil society, including Islam, is likely to be influenced by media interpretations. Using corpus linguistics, Baker et al. (2013b) found striking collocation of terms with regard to Islam: when analyzing press coverage of Islam for 1998–2009 from 200,000 articles (a sample of almost 143 million words) relating to Islam they found that half of the topic words combined "Islam" with "conflict" (Baker et al. 2013a, p. 6). In 1998–2009 they found that extremist Islam was blamed for radicalization about a third of the time when a reason for violence was

² For example, at the latest MBRN day workshop on Muslim arts in Britain, there was complex, sensitive and productive debate about the pressures facing British Muslim artists with regard to perceptions in certain community groups about performance and representations in art (Birmingham University 14 September 2017).

mentioned. In their 2015 follow-up research, to which we will return later, they found that by 2014 this reason was referred to two thirds of the time (Baker and McEnery 2015).

2. The Muslims in Britain Research Network (MBRN)

The Muslims in Britain Research Network (MBRN) was founded in the 1980s by the Birmingham based Islamic Studies scholar Jorgen Nielsen and seeks to promote multidisciplinary study of Muslims in Britain among academics, researchers and professionals. MBRN brings together academic and grassroots networks to discuss and resolve issues of concern. For decades small numbers attended, functioning as a valuable platform for isolated Islamic scholars in universities to meet and create a critical mass of intellectuals. By 2016, with Sophie Gilliatt-Ray as chair and a dynamic team, the MBRN approach resulted in membership exceeding 300 (almost doubling from several years prior), along with a continued rise in the number and range of participants at the bi-annual MBRN events. The turning point in changing from being a discussion forum for academics to a group that facilitates debate between and amongst academics, community leaders and community activists, is perceived by MBRN leadership to have been the April 2015 conference on leadership at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN), which attracted imams and other community leaders. Subsequent MBRN conferences covered issues of critical importance to all communities: poverty (Oxford, September 2015), peace (Coventry, 2016), gender (Leeds, 2017), Muslim art (Birmingham, 2017), populism and minority groups (London, 2018), community health initiatives (Bradford, 2018), The future of Muslim Studies (Cardiff, 2019) and British Muslim Charitable Organisations (Birmingham, 2020) have all commanded attention from both academics and community leaders and activists.

Attendance clearly reflects the way in which different topics activate different groups and individuals within British Islam and British Islamic Studies, which demonstrates the eclectic and rich intellectual activity both within and beyond academia in British Islam and indeed internationally. The conferences are noteworthy for facilitating debate amongst people who may not come across each other normally and who form networking bonds as a result of hearing each other speak, sharing a platform and spending the day together. As an example, we can take a closer look at the MBRN conference on Gender and the Public Space (Leeds, March 2017). This conference clearly aimed to unpack the many facets of this controversial debate from a range of methodological, theoretical and community perspectives. There were several main strands to the two themes of academic research and gender inclusion. Given that descriptions of Muslim community life have often been unacknowledged descriptions of Muslim men, how best might that be problematized? What theoretical work needs to be done to highlight gender exclusion or inclusion more concretely? How can Muslim male and female subjectivities be better understood separately or otherwise? Other questions regarded the impact of gender inclusion or exclusion upon research methodologies, ethical issues, questions of access and questions of academic representation. The discussion on the politics of gender inclusion and exclusion entered into questions such as: what role does the issue of gender inclusion now play in questions of state policies regarding Muslims? How far is it tied to questions of securitization and extremism? How central an issue is it in terms of discourses of Islamic reform or notions of personal authenticity in terms of new Islamic gender theology and everyday Muslim practices?

Not only do these conferences form a platform for discussion; there is also a rapid rise in wider public engagement with MBRN social media platforms. In terms of social capital thought, MBRN thus enhances bonds between those who know each other's work already and builds new bridges between individuals and groups who are all made stronger as a result of coming together. Fundamental to MBRN's success is the acceptance that there are irresolvable contradictions at the heart of every community (as indeed of every individual) and that these can, to an extent, be managed by bringing together those who are prepared to talk about them.

3. The British Association for Islamic Studies (BRAIS)

The British Association for Islamic Studies (BRAIS) developed out of the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) sponsored Islamic Studies Network (ISN). The ISN was established with government funding following Ataullah Siddiqui's report on *Islam at Universities in England* (Siddiqui 2007) which led to the designation of Islamic Studies as a strategically important subject in June 2007. The ISN spearheaded a series of reports which examined approaches to Islamic studies in the UK in comparison with international providers, current provision in British universities, and the status and future of the subject (such as Mukadam and Scott-Baumann 2010).

These reports demonstrated the disciplinary diversity of Islamic Studies in the UK and the broad scope of its scholarly community's research interests, providing empirical evidence on its strengths, but also highlighting its vulnerability; only a handful of departments and centers offer specialized programs, and most scholars work as lone experts in their respective fields. A way forward for the ISN was building a capital mass of experts in Islamic Studies broadly defined and represented in its advisory board. Subject-specific projects and regional events from 2010 to 2012 created a momentum that was carried forward by the British Association for Islamic Studies (BRAIS), a learned society and professional organization focused on enhancing research and teaching about Islam and Muslim cultures and societies in UK higher and further education. As a learned society, the main requirement for full (i.e., voting) BRAIS membership is holding a full-time position in an institution of Higher Education in the UK or Ireland. It is not primarily a community organization, although Associate Membership is available for those in positions of community leadership who have academic interests and expertise, by analogy, for example, with Christian ministers or Jewish rabbis who may wish to join the Society for Old Testament Studies. BRAIS was established in 2012 by members of the ISN advisory board, and was offered an institutional home by Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World at the University of Edinburgh.

BRAIS's founding vision reflects the legacy of the ISN, particularly in terms of (i) providing a forum for academic exchange for scholars with an interest in any aspect of Islam and the Muslim world, past and present, and (ii) becoming an umbrella organization for members working in a wide range of disciplines and geographical interest areas. BRAIS is the first learned society in the UK and Europe dedicated to Islamic Studies only. Its establishment was an important move toward recognizing Islamic Studies as a subject in its own right rather than as a subfield of Middle Eastern studies; thus expanding its scope to cover the Muslim world as well as Muslim minority societies in Western and non-Western contexts, and a rich range of approaches which draw on historical, textual and social scientific methodologies.

BRAIS also maintains and encourages relationships with providers of higher education-level Islamic Studies outside of publicly funded UK higher and further education. This is evident in the annual conference which often includes panels organized by the Islamic College in London and speakers from the Markfield Institute for Higher Education. To date, BRAIS has held seven conferences: Edinburgh 2014, London 2015 and 2016; Chester 2017; Exeter 2018; Nottingham 2019 and Aga Khan London 2020. The annual conference over the years has become an Islamic Studies flagship, attracting hundreds of papers from prominent UK-based and international keynote speakers, established academics and postgraduate students.³ The conference is unique in Europe and the US with its focus on Islamic Studies, which is why it attracts a substantial number of International scholars. In the conference feedback collated by BRAIS every year, participants have recurrently expressed the significance of bringing together those who work in cognate fields and facilitating knowledge exchange about new research.

BRAIS has also succeeded in building up a community of talented post-graduate researchers, who showcase their work at the annual conference alongside more established scholars in their respective

³ For the full programme of all annual conferences, see <http://www.brais.ac.uk/conferences>.

fields. BRAIS's vision from the start has been future-oriented, aiming to create opportunities for upcoming and junior scholars to better understand current developments in their areas and to develop research networks that enable them to plan more effective research trajectories. Two recent initiatives by BRAIS (2016) are particularly aimed at the next generation of Islamic Studies scholars; namely, the BRAIS-de-Gruyter book prize awarded to an outstanding PhD thesis or a first monograph in any Islamic Studies area, and the BRAIS workshop grants, one of which is awarded to a postgraduate researcher.

Although BRAIS is a small association with a membership not exceeding 200, it has made great strides in achieving its vision. Its success proves not only its viability but also its widely perceived importance to a growing field that faces many challenges in the current political climate and in the changing context of higher education.

4. Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)

Whereas MBRN and BRAIS take their core identity from being academic network organizations, in 2014, the Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) was set up by Muslim community activists to liaise directly between policy, practice, academic worlds and the wider community. The organization was successor to an earlier civil society organization, iEngage, whose work and staff MEND absorbed in 2014 when the body was reformed, rebranded and oriented towards a new course, functionally distinguishing between community activism and research advocacy.⁴

As a civil society organization, MEND is active on university campuses and in Muslim civil communities. It develops working relations with academics who work in both areas, for instance by facilitating access to Muslim focus groups, and incorporating extant academic research into MEND's literature and community training materials.

A primary function of iEngage/MEND's establishment in 2008 and 2014 was to challenge the growing misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in the British media. In the case of politics and public policy, MEND challenges dominant policy discourses on security and surveillance and on advancing discourses focused on racial and religious equality. Thus, MEND's activities represent ways to challenge dominant public and policy discourses. It thereby seeks alliances and co-operation with academics. MEND is present on university campuses and in civil communities, showing an organizing capacity to bring the two into regular contact. By organizing events on campuses and publicizing material about MEND to university staff and students, MEND attracts curiosity and interest (both positive and negative).

In its activities, MEND is also careful to incorporate mosques as a primary arena for delivering community engagement programs and training workshops by MEND. Among its early interventions was the publication of a 'media toolkit' designed in cooperation with academics to enable ordinary Muslims to contest representations in print and broadcast media through letters of protest to newspapers and the press industry regulator. The toolkit, which was first produced in 2008 and revised in 2013, before being relaunched in 2014, was supplemented in 2012 with literacy programs developed for Muslims consisting of media and political literacy training. The media and politics masterclasses, along with the toolkit, were intended to equip Muslims with knowledge, skills and confidence to challenge misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims drawing on the Editors' Code of Practice for the print media and OfCom's regulatory code for broadcast media.

Another powerful example of MEND's capacity to effect change, is the work done by Bunglawala on challenging a newspaper article in *The Sun*. The newspaper published a November 2015 headline "1 in 5 Brit Muslims' sympathy for jihadis." This was based on a Survation poll, which did not mention

⁴ A preliminary note which needs to be clarified at the outset is the dual platform model on which MEND was established. Although a functional distinction was always present, between the policy engagement and community engagement facets of the work, when MEND was created in 2014 this internal separation was formalized in outward presentation. Thus, MEND adopted a split site website homepage demarcating 'community' and 'advocacy' activities. But the functional separation was an important contributor to the ensuing bifurcatory relationship between higher education and community activism.

“jihadis” or “ISIS” or “ISIS fighters” and asked whether British Muslims felt “sympathy with young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria”. This headline led to the largest number of complaints that the Independent Press Standards Organization, IPSO ([IPSO Website n.d.](#)), had ever received. IPSO was set up in 2014 to be a self-regulator of the British press following criticisms of the failures of its predecessor, the Press Complaints Commission, over breaches of the self-regulatory code and rights violations by sections of the British press. IPSO chose MEND as the lead complainant to challenge *The Sun*. After months, IPSO concluded that *The Sun*, the biggest selling newspaper in the United Kingdom, had been responsible for coverage that was “significantly misleading” and *The Sun* was forced to issue a correction ([Worley 2016](#)).

Thus, by developing tools to train Muslims and build confidence and capacity in the community, MEND hoped to broaden the inclusion of Muslims in public debates about Islam and Muslims through direct participation in challenging dominant narratives constructed about their identity, integration and religious practices, as well as acting as a conduit for the marshalling of academic research to communities, via literacy programs, in order to enhance self-awareness. MEND’s approach to research outputs produced by the academy can be considered as meeting epistemological and existential needs, offering the means to better understand the condition facing Muslims in the media through utilization and dissemination of academic research investigating media portrayals of Islam and Muslims, and using research to chart a course for community activism to address prevailing negative stereotypes and narratives. Below, we will elaborate this further.

5. Epistemological and Existential Interests and Needs for Co-operation between MEND and Academia

Going deeper into the case of MEND, we will bring up several incentives for increased co-operation between Muslim advocacy organizations and British academics of Islam. These incentives are both epistemological and existential. For academics, co-operations offered important advantages. They show an emerging interest in the work of MEND as a vehicle for bringing academic research and community activist organizations into common spaces for mutual enrichment. Cooperation with MEND—or other Muslim civil society organizations, would offer them access to Muslim communities, which is not only needed for knowledge dissemination, but also for obtaining research funding (for instance for submission to the Research Excellence Framework—REF2014). Examples of this take the form of seminars organized by universities to which MEND has been invited to present contributions. Engagement of this type occurred early on, from 2009 onwards, and led to other forms of joint enterprises, for example, contributions to special journal editions collating conference papers. Another factor is the development of strong personal ties, as with academics at Lancaster University. A third factor at this juncture was the academic assessment exercise embodied in the Research Excellence Framework 2014 and the inclusion, for the first time, of the category of ‘impact’.

For MEND, assisting university academics to produce ‘impact profiles’, was something they could benefit from as well. Co-operations were used to open up research pathways for MEND itself. The possibility of research financed by civil society organizations and conducted by academics based at HEIs, was not a new development, nor is it specific to MEND.⁵ However, the co-operation also served a more fundamental, or even existential, need. As a community-based activist organization, MEND attempted to leverage academic research to advance community empowerment and advocacy goals. For these aims, they needed access to and engagement with academic research.

⁵ We can look to the establishment of the European Muslim Research Centre at Exeter University in 2010 and its primary report, ‘Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crime in London’, as well as research published by Spinwatch, ‘The Cold War on British Muslims: An examination of Policy Exchange and the Centre for Social Cohesion’ and ‘The Henry Jackson Society and the Degeneration of British Neo-conservatism: Liberal interventionism, Islamophobia and the ‘War on Terror’ and similar examples of civil society organisations commissioning academic research.

One of the advantages accruing to MEND from the network of relationships cultivated with academics and their respective outputs was the ability of MEND to identify and exploit impact potential. MEND contrasted the treatment of Islam in the media to a dominant narrative of the UK as a 'Christian country' and to the 'secular sacred', thereby engaging the non-faith sector in deliberations on the role of religion (particularly Islam) in the public sphere, or examined dominant associative terms with Islam and Muslims and frequency in the use of 'moderate' or 'extremist' terms in proximity to Islam and Muslims (and derivative nomenclature, 'Islamic'). By these means MEND served as a useful and effective vehicle for translating academic outputs into products consumable by non-academic users. The use of literacy training programs and materials for public awareness raising about Islamophobia are further examples of utilizing research output for social impact.⁶

Moreover, in engaging Muslims in active campaigns, MEND has variously produced training products for segmented groups of non-academic users addressing the specific needs of, for example, religious scholars and Muslim university students. As Brown and Saeed argue, the pressure that the securitization agenda brings to bear on Muslim students and students of color is considerable (Brown and Saeed 2015). While MEND may make this securitization agenda more complex by challenging it, what is of vital significance is what can be described as the consequence of 'visibility', a mixed blessing.

The targeting of imams in MEND's media and political literacy campaigns was intended to meet their specific needs in challenging media misrepresentation of their institutions, with mosques often bearing the brunt of a misdirected focus in terrorism news stories, and to overcome the detrimental impact on Muslim communities arising from low visibility of religious leaders in the media addressing issues of normative Islam and religious practice, particularly in relation to 'cultural conflict' paradigms prevailing in the British print media. Indeed, religious leaders' interest in MEND's media literacy training has been heightened by a growing focus on conservative social practices among Muslims and the deliberate targeting of particular scholars as undermining mutual respect and value pluralism.

A further point to add here is that this interstitial space has enabled two other by-products to emerge. The first is knowledge exchange, where MEND's expertise and community engagement tools have contributed to new research project proposals. For example, a paper was produced for the annual Labour party conference in September 2013, based on content analysis of one month's newspaper coverage in the British nationals following the murder of Lee Rigby. The paper, using a coding exercise, examined media reporting over one month following Lee Rigby's murder (23 May to 22 June), and compared and contrasted this incident to reporting on acts of far right extremist violence. The paper was delivered alongside Professor Tony McEnery, who was invited by MEND to present his research to the gathering. Bunglawala's paper later led to a complementary piece of work by McEnery and Love (2015) in which they used corpus linguistics methods to examine media coverage of Muslims following the murder of Lee Rigby within the same period. The example is indicative of Muslim civil society organizations undertaking and replicating research which draws on academic outputs and its synthesis with new research by academics on the same. An interesting observation to note here is the opportunity to explore 'unconscious bias' emanating from either/both community-based organizations and academics through complementary research.

The second example relates to the one above. In 2015, recognizing the lapse of time between research on media portrayals of Muslims in the British media in the work of Baker et al. (2013a), whose earlier work studied the period 1998–2009, Bunglawala at MEND commissioned an extension

⁶ Examples include MEND's dissemination of research on media portrayals of Islam and Muslims in its training workshops, in its mobile exhibition on Islamophobia (including exhibition guide—20,000 printed and distributed at venues around the country) and in its submissions to public consultations by government departments and select committees as well as in public meetings organised in parliament and other venues. In some of the above cited examples, the opportunities provided by Mend for dissemination of research findings was the first time academics had addressed certain types of audiences. For example: <http://cass.lancs.ac.uk/?p=1755>.

of the corpus data to cover the period 2010–2014. The research, which now consists of the largest ever corpus data analysis on media portrayals of Islam and Muslims (1998–2014), includes sub themes on halal meat, Muslim women, terrorism and radicalization, and the term Islamophobia (Baker and McEnery 2018).

For MEND, co-operation was driven by the need to provide counter-messages to the securitization agenda; they take place in a context of experienced misrecognition of Muslims. These contingent factors have come to serve as catalysts for deeper and institutionalized forms of engagement between the Academy and MEND.

6. MEND and Challenges to Media Misrepresentations and Misrecognitions of Islam and Muslims

In their paper on ‘Misrecognition and Political Agency: The case of Muslim organizations in a General Election,’ Dobbernack et al. (2015) posit five modalities of misrecognition experienced by British Muslim actors which inform their motivation to engage in politics and the identities/activities which result from engaging from a basis of misrecognition. The five modes of misrecognition are given as:

- Mode 1: Misrecognizing Muslim identity politics as markedly different in kind to other identity politics
- Mode 2: Misrecognizing the dynamic positioning and complexity of Muslim identities and concerns
- Mode 3: Misrecognizing Muslim agency as purely reactive, grievance-based or ‘pariah politics’
- Mode 4: Misrecognizing Muslim concerns as ‘sectarian’, not compatible with an orientation towards the common good
- Mode 5: Misrecognizing Muslim political actors as ‘toxic’ and refusing political association

MEND’s research advocacy section is invariably positioned within the loci of these modes of misrecognition, with its work denounced as peddling ‘Muslim identity politics’ which negates the secular imperative of the modern British state (M1), or criticized for homogenizing Muslim identities so as to privilege politicized identities to the detriment of non-politicized Muslim individuals (M2). MEND’s challenge to negative media portrayals of Islam and Muslims and its consequences for Muslim safety and wellbeing against a backdrop of rising Islamophobia, have been seized on as examples of ‘divisive’ rhetoric (M4). Its political engagement with institutions and processes—political parties, parliament, electoral campaigning—has faced criticism from quarters accusing it of ‘entryism’ (M3) while institutions and actors have been encouraged to desist from engagement (M5). For the purpose of this paper, we will confine ourselves to consideration of M3 and M5. Suffice to say, the modalities and especially the exclusionary prospects that follow from forms of misrecognition and their practical consequences present important dilemmas for community-based organizations like MEND, who seek to navigate beyond the limitations they are confronted with. However, they also present dilemmas for BRAIS/MBRN, with academics drawn into interstices in ways which can at times either affirm or dismiss the modalities of misrecognition.

- A principal construct which has reverberated through the securitization agenda and the various iterations of the Government’s counter-terrorism strategy, finding strong support among civil society organizations with a penchant for influencing and bolstering government approaches to the Muslim question, is the nomenclature used to describe Muslim political agency and Muslim actors as ‘Islamist’.
- While the definition of Islamist in the CONTEST (HM Government 2011a) strategy is based upon an idea of violent Muslims:
- “We define Islamist terrorism as acts of terrorism perpetrated or inspired by politico-religiously motivated groups or individuals who support and use violence as means to establish their interpretation of an Islamic society” (2011a, p. 9), the deployment of the term in policy and media

discourses has invariably inclined towards punitive assessment of Muslim political agency and aggrandizing claims about “the application of Islamic values to modern government”, occurring in the definition, while ignoring the more complex instruction that “[t]here are no commonly agreed definitions of ‘Islamism’ and ‘Islamist’, and groups or individuals described as Islamist often have very different aims and views about how those aims might be realized’ (HM Government 2011b).

- Non-violent extremism entered the lexicon as a way of broadening the risk and widening the search: “extremist organisations that appear to be non-violent (such as groups which neither use violence nor specifically and openly endorse its use by others)” (2011b, p. 19).
- Dobbernack, Meer and Modood explain the consequences of misrecognition arising from the failure to appreciate Muslim political agency in terms of the pluralization of the political sphere and the reductionist projection of Muslim articulations as “grievance-based, ‘pariah politics’” (Dobbernack et al. 2015, p. 5), as a portrayal which is “devoid of positive political objectives” (Dobbernack et al. 2015, p. 8).

The effect of misrecognition, and consequently exclusion, on Muslim actors whose professed ‘Muslim consciousness’ informs their modalities of engagement with politics, public policy and public discourse on Islam and Muslims in Britain is the denial of capacity to formulate, pursue and promote political objectives in terms that are respectful and accepting of the authority of their agency and the legitimacy of their claims. A related problem is the value attached to considerations of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ objectives where Muslim articulations of a robust civic response to government policies (a positive development) are presented as peddling “myths” (Norfolk 2017) in order to undermine government policy while collaborative work within civil society, involving Muslims and non-Muslim civic actors, is characterized as ‘colluding’ (Gilligan 2016) and ‘sabotaging’ (a negative development) (Sylvester 2016). The role of the media here is significant as the domain where proxy battles are fought between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims and creates friction between the Government’s preferred interlocutors and autonomous civil society actors, such as MEND and CAGE. It is in the policy domain that we can locate the ‘real’ battle, the struggle by Muslim civil society organizations to challenge the premise of counter-terrorism policy and push for fundamental reform. The crude classification of Muslim civil society organizations as ‘extremist’ or ‘moderate’, and ‘Islamist’ or ‘non-Islamist’, portends to limitations on the terms of inclusion, the opportunities for engagement and the parameters of ‘positive political objectives’ and attendant projects. Needless to say, the framework presents challenges to Muslim civil society organizations that refuse the terms of engagement presented to them by the Government and who come to rely upon terms of engagement embedded in democratic norms as a means of advancing their claims and correcting for systemic exclusion. In doing so, their battles to assert legitimacy and agency take on real and proxy forms.

7. ‘Misrecognition’ and Muslim Political Agency: Real and Proxy Wars

In a far-reaching report published in 2010, the Communities and local Government select committee examined the British Government’s ‘community-focused’ strand of the CONTEST counter terrorism strategy. The report was valuable for the breadth of submissions and contributions it attracted from Muslim civil society organizations and for early interventions into the setting of limits to the role of the Government in theological debates and engagement with faith-based organizations. Among the committee’s observations in the report, there are two that remain relevant over a decade on from the set-up of the committee inquiry in July 2009. The first is the recognition of state-sponsored initiatives which had the effect (still ongoing) of reshaping Muslim civil society by using state patronage to remodel relationships of power in civil society. The effect touches Muslim civil society organizations and academics, as research funding into radicalization and extremism and the pathology of Islam on which it is based attests. A relevant example of this can be seen in the creation in 2018 of the Commission for Countering Extremism. While established as an ‘independent’ entity, with its work described as operating at “arm’s length from Government”, the Commission’s website and commissioned research is hosted on a government portal (Commission for Countering Extremism 2020).

The select committee report of 2010 noted among its observations of Prevent and its implementation: “There is a sense that Government has sought to engineer a ‘moderate’ form of Islam, promoting and funding only those groups which conform to this model. We do not think it is the job of Government to intervene in theological matters . . . ” (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee 2010, p. 4). It further noted: “The Government’s current approach to engagement with Muslim organizations has given the impression that there are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of Islam—some endorsed by the Government, others not. The construction of an “Islamic experts industry”, funded and sanctioned by Government, has caused a variety of problems, including a failure to represent the views of the whole Muslim community” (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee 2010, p. 37). In as much as one can delineate from these criticisms the consequent impact on policy direction, the committee stated: “[T]here has been a pre-occupation with the theological basis of radicalisation, when the evidence seems to indicate that politics, policy and socio-economics may be more important factors in the process” (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee 2010, p. 3). More recently, the shift in preoccupation with the theological basis of radicalisation has mutated into concerns with policing ‘non-violent extremism’. The move from theology as expressive justification for journeys to violence has shifted to a broader terrain where ideas, language and behaviours, theological and other, are deemed susceptible to drawing individuals to terrorism. The ‘intent’ objective which underlies the Prevent component of the UK’s counter-terrorism strategy has evolved to police intent in the ‘pre-criminal space’. The move represents a twin danger to organisations that do not fit the ‘good’ Islam profile. The first is the all too easy elision of extremism with terrorism; where interstitial spaces can find their room for manoeuvre circumscribed by a security imperative. The second, related, danger is the designation of those labelled non-violent extremists as subjects of interest in the wider surveillance, containment and exclusion of Muslim civil society actors.

In the context of how the construction of “‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of Islam” (and by extension, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims) has affected Muslim civil society organizations and their operating in interstitial spaces, we have offered several demonstrable examples which illustrate activities arising in interstitial spaces and the reflexive encounters they enable. Where the physical space and the policy object have drawn Muslim civil society organizations and academics into a close embrace has been in their opposition to the ‘chilling effect’ on free speech effected by counter-terrorism policies (Scott-Baumann and Perfect 2020).

8. Occupying Interstitial Spaces: The Future

Our account has demonstrated that, to some extent, public spaces have been created by the activities of the discussed organizations and as such they are located in the areas selected by each organization. MBRN and MEND work with academics, policy makers and community groups that wish to work across boundaries. MEND has specific success with legal challenges, press and media coverage. BRAIS works more with academics based in universities and seeks to enhance existing academic structures with Muslim contributions. Each organization fills these spaces with strong Muslim voices that cover a spectrum from purely community-based to purely academic.

We have shown that civil society organizations are gaining access to valuable insights and analysis and academics being offered opportunities to disseminate research to audiences outside the academy. But such exchanges are often contingent rather than structured. These voices are still peripheral and risk becoming more so in a university sector and a society in which people think twice before having an evidence-based opinion—if that goes against the prevalent counter terror ideology. In this contribution we have also pointed at the existence of what we consider a ‘dangerous space’. In this space research takes place on terrorism, radicalization and extremism, having government approval and thus being generously funded. However, this strong focus on these themes misrepresents Islam. This activity occupies space in the cultural imagination of Britain, must be rejected and is a risk: it is a good career move to secure prestigious funding for such work, but this skewed funding will, over the next several

years, create a critical mass of findings that may be spurious and discriminatory.⁷ In the interstices created and populated by MBRN, BRAIS and MEND, the activities are more likely to be evidence-based rather than reactive responses to government policy. One target activity for such organizations must be to challenge the spaces that are limited through ideological constraints, e.g., it is easier to find space in the university curriculum to discuss terrorism than it is to learn about Sufism (Sheikh 2012). Another example, in addition to the counter-terror agenda, is the ongoing discussion about secularism: it appears usually partnered with religiosity, and the two become extreme forms of themselves in order to create a satisfyingly primitive polarized debate that will never become sophisticated or useful.

So far, the space permitted on university campuses to Islamic matters has usually been small. However, we expect this will grow as university academics act upon the need to incubate organizational models for the sharing of knowledge between the academy and civil society organizations and for knowledge production. The activities of MEND, MBRN and BRAIS are emerging examples of this taking place. It is not accidental that new forms of collaboration are being developed against the backdrop of rising populism in British politics and the need to counter demagoguery with evidence-based analysis and informed argument, declining levels of political engagement (in a formal sense; voting, contact between electors and elected officials), and major changes in the higher education sector.⁸

Our thoughts on how systematic interactions between the academy and civil society organizations might usefully develop in furtherance of the aims of knowledge production, exchange and dissemination include addressing structural obstacles, the flow of information and concerted efforts to exploit common interests arising from research outputs and their valued contribution to informed policy deliberations. The inclusion of the impact criteria in the Research Excellence Framework has undoubtedly opened up interest in widening audiences beyond the academy and exploring relevant user groups for knowledge sharing and exchange. However, nascent developments suggest that some higher education institutions are better at this than others. We would argue that subject associations can offer ripe opportunities to explore embedded, not contingent, patterns of engagement.

One such way is through the cultivation of a space within BRAIS/MBRN for civil society organizations who are reflexively positioned in the nexus between the academy and public policy discourse. While the academy is at the heart of knowledge production, knowledge sharing and exchange is a vital conduit to putting research outputs to practical use; a motive shared by all three groups. There are both direct and indirect means which can be employed and some universities are taking the initiative in direct methods by creating policy institutes within their higher education institution. Many others are doing it through contingent interactions with civil society organizations. BRAIS/MBRN can serve as a platform to structurally embed knowledge exchange methods by including civil society organizations in their conferences and opening their membership base to non-academic groups.

Conversely, civil society organizations can enhance their mode of engagement with the academy through collaborative, participatory or co-produced research, in order to strengthen the quality of their knowledge base and the value of their interventions in public policy debates. Civil society organizations also serve an instrumental role in communicating opportunities to exploit academic research to academics, given they are more likely to be aware of policy developments in their respective areas of interest and new needs in research. There are now clear pathways along these interstitial spaces created between and amongst mortar board, mosque and media.

Another thought is specific to the securitization agenda; here, the academy and civil society organizations have shown how collaborative work can effectively challenge an ideological bias in policy development and recalibrate the prevailing discourse to be attentive to empirical evidence and

⁷ For example, there has been no credible evidence produced about extremism developing on university campuses and leading to violent acts, yet that seems unbelievable when so much is written about the phenomenon of violent extremism on campus.

⁸ The Conversation, a website which serves as an open platform for academics to disseminate research outputs and academic knowledge in language and formats that are accessible to non-academic users.

emerging academic research. If the goal of all three organizations covered here is to further enhance understanding about Islam and Muslims in their own way and using their privileged tools, then their respective strengths can be aligned to mitigate their individual weaknesses in the wider service of a common goal that has never been so important.

Interstitial spaces have become the location of some fundamental shifts in policy and practice, as the examples given here demonstrate, and such significance merits a more coherent formulation for the germination, cultivation and nurture of future partnerships. We recommend that evaluations be conducted on each of these organisations, to establish the impact of both their processes and of their outcomes. Every year BRAIS, MBRN and MEND reach thousands of British Muslims and other interested parties: future goals should include more influence on the press and social media and in Westminster.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.S.-B. and S.B.; Investigation, A.S.-B. and S.B.; Methodology, A.S.-B. and S.B. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: The discussion on the role of MEND in occupying interstices and interacting in the interstitial spaces created by and through productive and critical exchanges between all three entities examined here relates to the period July 2008–December 2016 when Bunglawala led the research unit at iEngage/MEND. Scott-Baumann was chair of MBRN 2017–2020 and was on the board of BRAIS during that time. Many thanks to Lottie Moore for research assistance and to Shuruq Naguib for BRAIS information.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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