Submission to APPG on Religion and Media call for evidence: Inquiry into religious literacy in print and broadcast media

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Biography

I am writing this submission in a personal capacity, drawing on my experience as a sociologist and writer with particular expertise in the UK Jewish community. Currently, I work as a senior lecturer at Leo Baeck College (the progressive Jewish rabbinic seminary), I run the European Jewish Research Archive at the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and I am also an associate lecturer in the Department of Psycho-Social Studies at Birkbeck College. I am the author of six books, most recently *Strange Hate: Antisemitism, Racism and the Limits of Diversity*. I have written opinion articles, reviews and features for a number of publications, including the *Guardian*, *Times Literary Supplement, Prospect, New Statesman* and more. From 2014-2015 I edited the *Jewish Quarterly* literary magazine.

Introduction

I will primarily be addressing issues of religious literacy in the print (and online) media. My submission will be informed in particular by my work responding to one particular phenomenon regarding the visual representation of British Jews in the print and online media, together with my own experiences attempting to fairly represent the diversity of British Jewry in my own work in the print and online media.

My responses to a selection of questions from the APPG's call for evidence can be found in the last section of this document. Those responses draw on the information and case study given in the following 'Background' section. Readers are advised to read this section before reading my responses to the questions.

Background

The diversity of British Jewry

Analysis of the 2011 census suggests that there are at least 284,000 Jews in England and Wales (home to 97% of British Jews).[1] This is about 0.5% of the British population. More recent statistics suggest that, after several decades of demographic decline, the British Jewish population is growing, with births exceeding deaths.[2] This growth is largely due to

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[1] Graham, David, Boyd, Jonathan, Vulkan, Daniel *2011 Census results (England and Wales): Initial insights about the UK Jewish population*. Institute for Jewish Policy Research, Board of Deputies of British Jews. 12 December 2012: https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-uk156

[2] Casale Mashiah, Donatella *Vital statistics of the UK Jewish population: births and deaths*. Institute for Jewish Policy Research, Board of Deputies of British Jews. June 2018: https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-uk474

the rapid population growth, estimated at nearly 5% a year, of the strictly orthodox (Haredi) population, currently estimated to be 30-45,000 strong.[3]

The British Jewish population is highly diverse. I have outlined some of the branches of Judaism in a factsheet published by the Religion Media Centre.[4] This diversity is not simply religious, but exists along multiple, cross-cutting 'axes'. Some of the key axes include:

- Religious denomination, including:
    - Haredi (strictly orthodox)
    - Modern orthodox
    - Masorti
    - Reform
    - Liberal
- Religious observance
- Ethnic background
- Degree of communal engagement and involvement
- Place of residence
- Political beliefs

The challenge of representing the British Jewish population in the public sphere

The diversity of the British Jewish population makes speaking of Jews as a collective a difficult task. The challenge is ultimately one of 'representation' (representation as in the sense of describing Jews rather than in the sense of speaking for Jews, although that too is a complex). When representing British Jews in the public sphere, there are a variety of challenges:

- The challenge of understanding the extent and distribution of diversity

    Some types of Jewish diversity may be widely recognised (for example, the distinction between Haredi Jews and other Jews) and others less so (for example, Jews who are not Ashkenazi). The relative size of particular sub-sections of the UK Jewish population may be underestimated or overestimated (for example, the proportion of Jews who are not Zionists).

- The challenge of appreciating the nexus of religion, ethnicity and other dimensions of Jewishness

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[3] Staetsky, L. Daniel, Boyd, Jonathan *Strictly Orthodox rising: What the demography of British Jews tells us about the future of the community*. Institute for Jewish Policy Research. October 2015:
[4] Kahn-Harris, Keith 'Branches of Judaism', Religion Media Centre, April 18th 2018.
https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/factsheets/branches-of-judaism/

Judaism can be described as a religion, but the Jewish people are not reducible to religion alone. Aside from the existence of Jews who are not religiously-practicing but may still feel their Jewishness intensely, Judaism is usually inseparable from ethnic identity. Very few Jews see their Jewishness as only a private matter of religious 'faith'; it is also a sense of belonging and identity. It is easy to privilege one dimension of Jewishness over all others

- The challenge of not conflating belief, practice, affiliation and identity

Even when considering the religious dimension of Judaism, membership of a particular synagogue or denomination is not always the same as believing in its precepts and practicing all its rituals and laws. Further, to be a member of a synagogue or denomination does not always imply identifying oneself as a Jew primarily in terms of that membership. For that reason, to state 'Reform Jews believe…' or 'Orthodox Jews practice…' is sometimes to risk inaccuracy. Even in the Haredi community, where one might expect the closest integration of affiliation and practice, there can sometimes be a gap between what religious leaders tell their followers to do, and what they actually do (for example, despite widespread prohibitions on internet use, there is a thriving online Haredi presence).

- The challenge of using appropriate language

When Jews live in the Diaspora, they are sometimes required to conform to the use of collective nouns that did not originate in Jewish populations. For example, to describe Judaism as a 'faith' is to use a term that Jews rarely use themselves in Jewish-only contexts. While this gap between private and public language may be inevitable, those who seek to represent Jewish life in Britain should, at the very least, have some awareness that the gap exists.

- The challenge of 'authenticity'

Faced with the complexities of Jewish identity, it is tempting to search for a particular kind of Jew that embodies Jewishness most 'authentically'. While it is understandable that those who are not Jewish may wish to search for such a Jew, it is not the place of non-Jews to pass judgement on authenticity and doing so may risk exacerbating intra-Jewish conflict

- The challenge of 'exoticism'

Given that some Jews, particularly Haredi Jews, live lives very different to those of most British residents, there is a danger that Jews will be seen as somehow 'mysterious' and 'exotic'. While minimising differences between Jews and others is problematic, so is the opposite.

Clearly, the multiple challenges involved in representing Jews fairly and accurately are somewhat daunting! However, one cannot face challenges that one doesn't know even exist. In the next section, I will offer one case study of challenges not being acknowledged.

Case Study: The use of photographs of Haredi Jews as the prototypical Jew in British print and online media

Over the last few years I have been collating examples of the use of photographs of Haredi Jews to illustrate stories about British Jews. The instances I am particularly interested in are:

- Where the story being illustrated concerns British Jews in general, rather than specifically Haredi Jews.
- Where the story being illustrated specifically concerns *non*-Haredi British Jews.
- Where the photo used features Haredi men photographed from the back.

One very commonly used photo that falls into these categories is as follows:

A Google Reverse Image Search reveals dozens of examples of this photo being used to illustrate stories about British Jews. Some of the stories concern Haredi Jews specifically and others concern British Jews generally, without specific reference being made to Haredi Jews.

The photo is also used in a few cases to illustrate stories that could not relate to Haredi Jews at all. For example, it was used to illustrate an article in the *Spectator* in 2017 to illustrate a column by Geoffrey Alderman entitled 'Jewish student are turning their backs on British

universities. Who can blame them?'.[5] Not only do only a tiny number of Haredi Jews attend universities, they are often discouraged from doing so by the leaders of their community.

Even when the photo is used to illustrate stories about Haredi Jews, the choice of a photograph of Haredi men from behind is not 'innocent'. In collecting multiple instances of photographs of Haredi Jews in the UK press, there seems to be a clear preference of photos where Haredi men are pictured with their backs to the photographer. Such photographs, while they may tacitly acknowledge the value the Haredi community places on discretion and privacy, also connote mystery and exoticism. They are not produced with the consent or involvement of the community itself. Further, the use of photographs of Haredi women is almost unknown, and while once again avoiding the use of such photos is an acknowledgement of the value Haredi women place on modesty, inevitably this avoidance ends up privileging Haredi men as the generic Jew.

A modicum of research revealed that the photo presented above, together with most other photos of Haredi men that appeared in the UK press in recent years, actually derives from a single photo session in Stamford Hill, Hackney, in January 2015. The photographer was commissioned by the photo library Getty Images to illustrate a story that police were stepping up patrols in Stamford Hill in the wake of terrorist attacks on Jewish targets in Europe. As such, the photos were originally appropriate to the story. However, once the photos were made available to users of Getty Images, they were reused multiple times by multiple press outlets, removed from their original context, to provide generic images of 'Jews'.

What is even more interesting is that a look at the entire set of photos from Getty Images[6], reveals that it includes a version of the widely-used photo above – but this shows the two men from the front. As far as I can ascertain, *this photo has never been used in the UK press*:

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[5] https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/jewish-students-are-turning-their-backs-on-british-universities-who-can-blame-them-
[6] https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/photos/british-police-to-step-up-patrols-in-jewish-communities

This case study is revealing of an apparently wide consensus in the UK press that, visually at least, Haredi men signify 'Jew' better than anyone else. Moreover, the preference for 'faceless' photographs suggest that they signify Jew in a mysterious and exotic alluring way.

This consensus represents a failure to respond to the challenges that I outlined in the previous section. In the terms of this inquiry, they represent a failure of 'religious literacy'. The question is, what kind of failure? It is not simply ignorance as, clearly, those who make use of the photo know enough to know that Jews can look a certain way. Rather, it is a more complex failure. As I will suggest in the next section, religious literacy is multi-dimensional.

Responses to questions in the call for evidence

What do you understand by the term 'religious literacy'?

I would suggest that religious literacy is distinct, but related to, religious *knowledge*. One can have knowledge of a religion without necessarily being literate about it. Rather, I define religious literacy as follows:

> *Religious literacy is the ability to navigate the complexity of the category of religion so that the particular identities and sensitivities of individuals and groups that are 'caught up' in the category are taken into account.*

Religious literacy, in this sense, requires at a minimum:

1. An understanding of the limitations of the category of religion and its relationship to other categories, such as ethnicity.
2. An understanding of the diversity of groups that are categorised as religious
3. A deliberate agnosticism towards the religious authenticity or otherwise of particular individuals or groups.

What effect does a lack of religious literacy have on broadcast and/or print media?

The case study outlined above suggests widespread and consistent religious illiteracy, across a wide swathe of the UK print and online media, at least when it comes to Jews. The ubiquitous use of Haredi photos to signify 'Jew' fails to meet the three requirements above in that:

1. Photographs that might signify Jewishness as an ethnicity or Jewish secularity are avoided in favour of photographs that are assumed to highlight the most unambiguously religious Jews.
2. Given that Haredi Jews are still a minority of British Jews, the lack of photographs of other Jewish religious denominations suggests a lack of awareness or interest in the diversity of the Jewish majority.
3. Making the choice to use photographs of Haredi Jews to signify 'Jew' is an implicit statement that Haredi Jews are the most authentic Jews.

When, where and how is religious literacy learnt?

I have taught foundation-level classes on Judaism at university and, in writing an introductory guide to Judaism[7], I read multiple other introductory guides. Curricula and learning materials on Judaism frequently homogenise Jewish life, sometimes stating that 'Jews believe' and 'Jews observe', without taking into account the multiplicity of approaches to Jewish life. While these materials often explain that different denominations exist, diversity is rarely placed at the heart of education about Judaism. Inevitably, one outcome of this is to encourage non-Jews in the assumption that some Jews – usually Haredi Jews – embody what true and authentic Jewishness is.

What effect does religious illiteracy have on decisions journalists make when assigning, researching, and reporting news stories?

One of the peculiarities of UK press coverage of Jews over the last few years is that, while images of Haredi Jews are ubiquitous, the stories themselves are more heterogeneous in their coverage. For example, the enormous amount of coverage of the Labour Party antisemitism dispute has usually focused on the experience and views of Jews who are not Haredi. That stories of this kind are often illustrated with photographs of Haredi Jews suggests both a tacit awareness that Jews are diverse, alongside a tacit assumption that certain Jews are, nonetheless, more authentic than others.

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[7] Kahn-Harris, Keith *Judaism: All That Matters*. Hodder Education. 2012.

What methods can be used by journalists to engage with faith groups sensitively? Please illustrate your answers where possible.

There are multiple methods that journalists can use to engage with faith groups sensitively. I will choose one:

Journalists should communicate with faith groups in ways that reflect the language that those groups use to describe themselves. That means, in the Jewish case, avoiding the term 'faith groups'! Jews who define themselves as secular do not like to be called a member of a faith or religion, and even those who are religiously practicing may be uncomfortable with the term faith.

Sensitivity also requires that journalists should inform themselves about the names of types of Judaism that are used by Jews themselves. So, for example, Haredim rarely like to be called 'ultra-orthodox'; members of synagogues affiliated to the Liberal Judaism denomination are sometimes annoyed when they are lumped in with Reform Jews.

What steps should be taken to better equip journalists when engaging with issues relating to faith?

Clearly there is a need for journalists to receive briefings on religious matters. I suggest though that such briefings would do more harm than good if they fail to acknowledge diversity within religious groups or do not problematise terms such as 'faith'.

Over the last decade, has religious literacy in the media improved, remained the same or deteriorated? If it has changed for the better or worse, please explain how?

There is at least one thing that has changed for the worse: Now that most articles are published online, it is usual practice to accompany every article with a photograph or illustration (which is not always the case in print). This means that sub-editors and writers are forced to find a single picture that will embody the story, regardless if this is a practical proposition or not.

The problem is exacerbated by such factors as: growing pressure to publish quickly online, layoffs of experienced journalists and sub-editors, lack of specialist photographers and photo editors.

What steps can a) universities, b) journalists, c) publishers, d) broadcasters and e) regulators take to improve religious literacy in media?

Over and above any practical suggestions that the APPG receives as to steps that should be taken to improve religious literacy, the *content* will be ineffective in producing the desired results if it does not problematise the term religion (or faith) itself.

It is not just Jews who are situated within a complex nexus of religion, ethnicity and other categories, other 'religious' groups are too. In fact, one might argue that the term religion only applies successfully amongst some Christian groups (particularly Protestants). For most

other individuals and groups who practice something that can be categorised as a religion, their identities are usually compiled from a complex mixture of elements that are not confined to the expression of faith and participation in ritual.

Ultimately, the lack of religious literacy about Judaism that I have experienced in both observing and participating in the UK press, derives from too limited a notion of what religion is. In this sense, while religious literacy consists of multiple elements, it is questioning the term religion itself that – ironically – provides the key to its improvement.