

THE BLOG

When My Daughter Asked 'Mummy, What's A Terrorist?' I Knew I Had To Work On Extremely British Muslims

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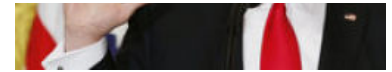




For me it must have been a tipping point. I suddenly felt driven now to make a series of documentary films about being a British Muslim that went beyond the news headlines. We didn't set out with an agenda, but we did want to put ourselves in a Muslim community and explore and record the day-to-day lives and experiences of ordinary Muslims in the UK. We wanted to make something honest and nuanced.

We were looking for a Mosque that would let us in to it and the surrounding community. I first approached Birmingham Central Mosque in January 2015. I felt sure that this was the right place for us to make the series. Apart from being one of the biggest mosques in the UK with a regular congregation of 6,000 - and up to 30,000 on Eid - it is also a kind 'one-stop shop' for local Muslims. Under one roof, there is a Marriage Bureau (helping single Muslims to find a marriage partner), a Sharia Council (mainly dealing with issuing divorces), an advisory line (where the community could check on rules and observances), a funeral service and and Qur'an school for kids. Birmingham, too, felt like a great place to make the films. It's home to a large, thriving and diverse Muslim community, whilst an American Fox news pundit infamously described the city as a "no-go zone" for non-Muslims. There have been incidences of radicalization in the city, but the numbers are tiny compared to the size of the population as a whole.

I spent six months in talks with the mosque's senior committee. They voiced understandable concerns and fears about letting cameras in; they worried about how they might be portrayed. It's only recently that the work of people like Miqdaad Versi of the Muslim Council of Britain, has started to methodically challenge unfair or untrue representations of Muslims in the media.



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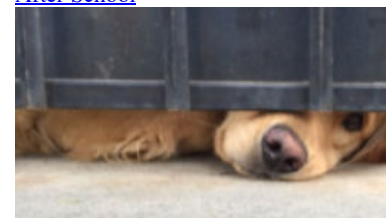
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Not only did I have to persuade them that we would be fair, but I had I had to convince them that in turn, they should let us in fully. If we were going to make documentary films that might lead to a more thoughtful, honest and healthy conversation about who British Muslims are, the audience needed to see that this was unrestricted, access-all-areas.

We knew it would be tough getting people to trust us but were hopeful that with 6,000 people passing through the doors of the mosque every week, it would only be a matter of time before we found the right people to film with. But none of us were prepared for how tough it would be.

We were invited into people’s homes, welcomed, fed, invited to their weddings, but when it came to the idea of filming, people just weren’t ready to let us in. Often when people did agree to speak to us on camera, they would then get nervous and pull out of filming. It was often, friends, family or phone calls from other mosques telling them not to trust us, which undermined their confidence.

In hindsight, of course it was hard to film in this community. There were layers of cultural nervousness. This Muslim community in Birmingham is predominately from Mirpur in Pakistan, and still has links there. This makes it a sometimes conservative and often private community, where people can worry about what their peers and neighbours think. Add to that the global shift after 9/11, the frustration of being in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons, and a suspicion that the media often portrayed them unfairly. One young man at the mosque asked me outright, “How as a Muslim can you work in the media?”

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The women we came across were often concerned about getting the support of their fathers or husbands. Similarly, even once we'd grown close to the men we were filming with, often they were opposed to us filming the women in their family. Although this came from a sense of protectiveness rather than wanting to suppress the women's voice, it was another factor that made it very hard to make the films. Luckily, we did meet some brilliant and strong women who agreed to film with us.

Through the production team's constant commitment and perseverance we got enough people to trust us to make this series and we are incredibly grateful to the contributors who put their faith in us, despite their fears and the backlash from the community. They were incredibly brave and it took a lot for them to hold on to the bigger picture. My proudest moment of the production was when we showed the films to two of the main contributors, Waz and Nav: their response was pure joy and they said, 'We can't wait to go back to the community and tell lots of people they were wrong about you!'

We ended up with three films about different aspects of Muslim life. The first film is about young Muslims looking for a husband or wife and the challenges of meeting the needs of their parents, staying within Islamic boundaries as well as meeting their own needs as young British people. For this we found some confident, bright women, with clear ideas about what they wanted in a future husband. Film Two explores what is like to be a young Muslim man, growing up in the shadow of the news headlines, being judged for having a beard and feeling stigmatized in a post-9/11 world. As one of the contributors said recently about the difference between him and the younger generation of Muslims: "We grew up with Rosie and Jim, they are growing up with Jihadi John". In the third Film, we look at some of the rules of Islam and how people choose to interpret them. For this we filmed with, amongst others, Abdul, a white revert married to a Pakistani woman, with a brother who is in the EDL. We see Abdul trying to steer his step children using the rules of Islam, which brought structure to his own life.

The feedback from showing the films to those who have taken part has been unanimously positive. The team and the people who took part are very proud of it. My hope is that it does contribute in some way to a healthier dialogue

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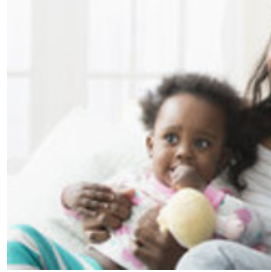
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