

**French Facial Covering Ban: A Comparison of American and French Media Coverage
from 2010 – 2012**

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Abstract

In September 2010, France became the first European country to enact a ban on full facial coverings. French Parliament cited safety and French values of secularism as the reasoning behind the ban, but public debate around the true intentions of the ban and its implications for the country's large Muslim population intensified. This paper seeks to analyze media coverage surrounding the ban and its ensuing effects on public perception of the event throughout the year it was passed and up to two years post-legislation. Turning a critical eye to the dissemination of information on an international scale, this research seeks to analyze the language, tone, and themes between major American and French news agencies as two countries with widely impactful media outlets, vast international influence, and a populous with access to the increasing accessibility of technology and social media of the time. Ultimately, France's facial-covering ban includes written law that does not specify religious garments at all, differing from the articles identified within this research and showing potential correlation between the media's reporting and the public's perception of the law.

Keywords: French facial covering ban, French secularism, effects of globalization

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The French ban on facial coverings came into effect in 2010, causing discourse across Europe, the Americas, and Islamic-majority countries as France became the first European country to enact such a law. Though the official French law, Act No. 2010-1192, refers very broadly to facial coverings, the media's coverage of the ban demonstrated a tight focus on gendered and religious interpretations of it, with articles often labeling the ban as targeted towards Islamic women's religious garb and the ban's contribution toward a preexisting "anti-Muslim climate" throughout the country (Beardsley, 2011). Further, considering France had the highest Muslim population in Europe as of 2016 at 8.8% of its total populace, the law's passing may have contributed to subsequent bans across at least thirteen European countries between 2010 and 2019 (Hackett, 2017).

France has a deep history of colonialism and secularism; the French colonized numerous Middle Eastern and North African countries throughout the last four centuries, including modern-day Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco in the 1800s and Syria and Lebanon in the 1900s (Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism, 2022). In the late 20th century, after the 1989 'affaires de foulard' events unfolded, wherein three schoolgirls were expelled after refusing to remove head coverings, scholars identified the media as a driver of the controversy through "inflaming public uneasiness about the place of North African immigrants...in French society" (Scott, 2005, p. 108). The previous ban and its coverage may have contributed towards the first ban within the 21st century, which consisted of banning religious clothing articles in public schools (Law No. 2004-228, 2004).

Six years later, the French facial covering ban went into effect (Lang, 2023). Despite a lack of religious specifications in the written law, French police stopped over forty women, charging and fining over twenty-five of them within a month of the ban (Baume, 2011). According to the French President at the time, Nicolas Sarkozy, veils act as a form of oppression against women, emphasizing the ban's underlying religious intentions. Contrary to Sarkozy's statements, a 2018 United Nations Human Rights Committee meeting concluded that the 2011 French veil ban oppresses practicing Muslim women, specifying that the ban may not protect or liberate them but instead "confine women to their homes, impeding their access to public services and marginalizing them" (United Nations, 2018).

French secularism, referred to as *laïcité*, is a tenet of French republicanism and has remained a stark defense for bans on public displays of religion. One distinct difference between the 2004 and 2011 bans is that the 2011 ban targets full-facial coverings, such as niqabs and burqas, as opposed to the 2004 ban on any noticeable religious covering, including the hijab. Therefore, under the 2011 law, hijabs are technically permissible due to not fully concealing one's face, and the law is often defended by supporters as one of public safety rather than strictly one of secularism.

Research Methodology

A contemporary method of research, combining qualitative and quantitative elements, was necessary in order to collect an appropriate number of pertinent articles from sources that the public would have large and common access to, including major news outlets. Secondly, the research must include a comparison of more than one news outlet and country, as major sources the public considers accessible, relevant, and trustworthy may hold reporting biases, including

partisan bias, selection bias, and elements of sensationalism; in an effort to not ignore the increasing effects of globalization in media reporting and information dissemination, a critical lens towards international reporting was used through analyzing articles from internationally-known outlets (“Bias in the Media,” 2022). The analysis of major Western news outlets ultimately allowed for a narrowed approach to exploring how media coverage may have affected the public’s perception of the French written law, including France’s large Muslim population, as well as American coverage, as a country of significant magnitude of “interaction and relatedness between nations,” in which “colonial ties” are “given more news attention within the same colonial group,” increasing international news flow (Wu, 2000).

Agence France-Presse (AFP) is a newswire agency based in Paris dating back to the 1830s as “the world’s first true news agency” (“Agence France-Presse,” 2017). An important distinction between wire agencies and newspapers includes newswire distributions. *AFP* has several “bureaus in major French cities” alongside “contracts with the *Associated Press (AP)*, Reuters, and ITAR-TASS for the exchange of news reports,” meaning the dissemination of *AFP*’s content casts a wide net between major (“Agence France-Presse,” 2017). Therefore, the choice of news outlets within this research does not include American agencies such as *AP* or *United Press International* in an attempt to avoid potential double-reporting instances or research biases through *AFP*’s sales and connections to American news agencies.

Two major American news outlets were chosen based on viewership, international presence, and general prominence. *Cable News Network (CNN)* and the *New York Times* adequately capture general American interests and cover various news topics on domestic and international scales but do come with potential biases as left-leaning publications. Media trends throughout 2010 also exacerbated the effects of globalization and digestion of news due to an

increase in social media and technology use, with drastic increases in smartphone ownership and digestion of news at a faster rate; social media witnessed a “banner year,” and competition for “cheaper, smarter phones” aided in increasing consumer technology use around the world (Armano, 2010). The exponential rate at which technology was advancing and simultaneously becoming more accessible to the common population allowed for greater international connection, especially between countries already privileged in aforementioned “interaction and relatedness” (Wu, 2000).

Nexis Uni acted as the main tool to collect relevant news articles, as accessed through Temple University libraries. Specific filtering elements, including a strict timeline and keywords, were used to ensure articles were highly relevant to the French facial covering ban. A general search was conducted for the term “French ban” within all news articles between January 1, 2010, to December 31, 2010; September 1, 2010, to December 31, 2010; and September 1, 2010, to December 31, 2011. These dates encompass the eight months prior to the ban’s passing in September 2010, as well as the initial months following in order to record starker media responses, and the year following as news outlets gained more information, analyzed the public’s perception of the event and reactions to media coverage, and balanced coverage between the ban and other prominent events.

Nexis Uni filters were utilized to separate French and U.S. news outlets, and non-biased versus biased wording was identified in general news searches, including “French ban,” “hijab,” and “burqa.” Using *Nexis Uni*, *AFP* was filtered to include only its French publishing circuit. Separately, U.S. outlets *CNN* were filtered together to include *CNN.com*, *CNN*, and *CNN Transcripts*, excluding *CNN International*; the *New York Times* includes the *New York Times* and *New York Times Abstracts*, excluding the *New York Times - International Edition*. An initial

search for “French ban” across all news organizations for the entirety of 2010 led to 1,432 results, with 433 results between September and December 2010 alone. Beginning to filter by publication, articles including “French ban” in 2010 through *AFP* brought 99 results. Combined, *CNN*, *CNN.com*, *CNN Transcripts*, the *New York Times*, and *New York Times Abstracts* brought 35 results for “French ban” throughout the entirety of 2010, and, excluding January through August, 13 results were found (Nexis Uni, 2022).

Ultimately, a majority of the articles from both sources and countries emphasized themes regarding the ban’s implications for Muslim individuals and debates between Western and Islamic nations. Several themes emerged from the analysis of ten articles that largely encapsulated commonalities found through *Nexis Uni*, including a largely Islamic focus despite common secular defenses of the law; an international reporting lens, mainly including American sources, outlooks, and opinions; the use of coded language, much of which may indicate unconscious bias in media reporting and instances of Islamophobia; and an attempt to balance coverage through equally depicting supporters and protestors of the ban, as recognized through the media's choosing of sources.

Islamic Focus

There are several important truths to identify about the written law as opposed to media coverage of the ban. Firstly, the law does not specify religious coverings within its text; it is stated that "no one may, in the public space, wear an outfit intended to conceal his face" and defines "public space" as roads and anywhere "open to the public or assigned to a public service" such as schools, stores, or government buildings (Law No. 2010-1192, 2010). The only mention of religion within the stated law is within its exceptions, which include an outfit "prescribed or authorized by legislative or regulatory provisions...justified by health or professional

reasons...or...within the framework of sports practices, festivals or artistic or traditional events" (Law No. 2010-1192, 2010). Regardless, breaking this law results in up to €150 in fines and the potential for mandatory participation in a citizenship education course, with harsher repercussions for charges of forcing another adult or minor to wear coverings despite the ban.

Within the 99 *AFP* instances of "French ban," 15 included either "burqa ban," or Islamic-related terms within the headline, amounting to approximately 15 percent of articles within 2010. Within the 35 *CNN* and *New York Times* results, eight headline instances and over ten instances of "burqa ban" were mentioned within article's body texts, amounting to approximately 23 percent of articles within the sample. These results reflect a medium level of media bias but could also reflect the general public's initial perception and religious connotations of the ban, as well as significant international political stakeholders' perceptions of the ban and its intentions. This includes polarizing stakeholders, such as Presidents and prominent Congress and Senate members across major nations, as well as extremists such as Bin Laden, who was mentioned in five articles within the sample-set. Media coverage of the ban, therefore, shows a relevant leaning towards the topics of Islam and women's rights, as opposed to purely referencing the law's stated intentions to ban all general facial coverings.

Media coverage shows an ongoing focus on the Islamic connotations of the law, and this focus is displayed prominently through both French and American headlines such as "Burqa ban turns a right into a crime," "France brushes off US [sic] criticism of burqa ban," and "France's Islamic veil ban spurs passionate reaction worldwide," although the stated law is officially titled "Prohibiting the concealment of the face in public space" (Joseph, 2011; Law No. 2010-1192, 2010; Saba 2011). Similar headlines were also used in 2010, such as "French burqa ban clears last legal obstacle," prior to the ban being passed (Orjoux et al., 2010). This signifies an Islamic

focus prior to providing the public with clarity on the written law and proves an instance of the media setting the public's agenda. When observing the *New York Times*, however, a more mindful approach to headlines was taken, with phrases such as 'veil ban' and 'full-face veils' used rather than specific mentions of Islamic religious wear. Still, religious connotations exist with the use of the word veil, and it is argued that such phrases are an indicator of coded language targeting Muslims (Lopez, 2016).

Deeper than headlines, articles were brimming with facts regarding France's Muslim demographics and often sourced Muslim individuals, experts, and even extremists. For example, an article titled "France bans the burqa" begins by stating that France is "home to Europe's biggest Muslim population," with the phrase "...[France] officially banned women from wearing full-face veils in public places" immediately following. The article did not go on to quote the law itself but justified writing about its religious connotations by stating that "the law comes into effect at an already fraught moment in relations between the state and France's Muslim minority" due to former President Sarkozy's desire for far-right voter support ("France bans the burqa," 2011).

The article also mentioned Osama Bin Laden and ended with a brief mention of two everyday French and Muslim women, who told *AFP* that the ban would cause alienation as niqab- and burqa-wearing women felt unable to leave the home as often if uncovered. Another *AFP* article, titled "Burka [sic] ban makes big deal of non-issue: Muslim leader" (2011), provides figures including the approximate number of France's Muslim population at four to six million as compared to the number of Muslim women who wear a veil at a couple of thousand, which was written in an effort to showcase the law's targeting of such women. The only articles found to specifically quote the law include those from the *New York Times*, where the phrase

"garment 'designed to hide the face'" was used (Audi, 2010). While quoting the law provides a greater sense of objectivity, it also points out the vague standards the law provides, which may contribute to the unequal targeting of minority groups, thus helping justify the media's leaning towards the religious implications the law provides.

American Reporting Lens and Diversity in Sources

The observed papers dissected the French ban from an American perspective, often in terms of religious freedom, as opposed to France's history of emphasizing secularism. Further, U.S. papers heavily utilized American sources while quoting negative or aggressive statements from French sources. For example, in an article titled "France's Islamic veil ban spurs passionate reaction worldwide," it is stated that several non-Muslim sources "strongly opposed the French ban...because of their views on freedom of religion" (Saba, 2011). The article also states America as having an "egalitarian attitude toward Islam" as compared to "France and many other Western nations" and goes as far as quoting an American Muslim stating that "America is an ideal place to worship and live" (Saba, 2011).

While several other European nations have followed France's lead on instituting facial covering bans, the period of Saba's article likely indicates a referral to Belgium, regions of Spain, and talks of bans in Switzerland. Two U.S. articles, both written during the ban's initial acceptance stages, sourced both the French government and international bodies, mainly quoting international entities that disagreed with the ban such as the European Rights Court, Amnesty International, and Pew Forums (Orjoux et al., 2010; Evans, 2010). American media sourcing influential bodies that agree with America's perspective on the ban could create an echo chamber for readers but may also serve to add diversity of opinion due to the French government's

adamant position on the law, the non-Muslim French population's majority approval of it, and mimicking bans made in several other Western countries.

French coverage also heavily referred to American sentiment about the ban. This can be seen in a dateline Paris report from a month prior to the ban going into effect, in which it is stated that "two out of three Americans opposed" the French ban and potential "burqa bans in Germany, Britain, and Spain, contrasting the 82% approval rate in five other Western countries surveyed (2011). Earlier in the article it is written that the ban has "sparked a debate over religious freedoms," but later specifies that five influential Western countries overwhelmingly agree on the ban's implementation. By specifying the disapproval of the ban in the U.S. directly after stating multiple countries with highly accepting attitudes towards the debate, America is highlighted as an outlier and stands out in comparison to the majority. In a 2012 article titled "France brushes off US [sic] criticism of burqa ban," Barack Obama was sourced as "fiercely (criticizing) European moves to ban the veil" and referred to a speech the former President held in Cairo in 2009.

Overall, "unifying items" such as the concepts of religious freedom or a belief in what women's rights entail in Western countries is a part of a national identity (Friedman and Merle, 2013). Through both American and French media sourcing the other's leaders, especially ones with conflicting opinions, America was attempting to separate itself from France's decision and emphasize its values of freedom in religion as opposed to French governmental beliefs in secularism. The language used in articles also created an "us" versus "them" dynamic between America and France, which is interesting as both are Western nations, and typical "us" versus "them" dynamics occur between French and Muslim immigrants.

Use of Coded Language

Coded language is the practice of using words seeming race or identity-neutral to generalize, discriminate against, or target a singular race or identity (National Education Association, 2017). In the context of Islam, for example, the consistent use of the term "terrorist" in the media has intensified assumptions and fears of individuals who present as Muslim, including wearers of various types of veils.

Another example includes fear-mongering language, such as protestors "threatening U.S. interests abroad and at home" (Todd et al., 2012). Painting protestors as violent or threatening a country's interests breeds fear in the American public and could lead to broad assumptions about all individuals in or from the foreign country. Referring to the West as "at home" also emphasizes the idea of Muslim individuals being "the other," especially when referring to protestors in non-Western countries, such as those in various parts of the Middle East. Such language implies that the Western power writing the article, America, is the recognizable, powerful "us" against "them," and France, as a Western power itself and the country sparking protests, is a similar "us" agent. It is important to note that the cited article and its contents about worldwide protests are in regard to the release of an anti-Islam film, but the protests come after an increase of over 50% in Islamophobic attacks in the year following France's ban (France 24, 2012).

Fortunately, especially as compared to coverage from the 2004 ban, coded language was used extremely minimally in the observed articles. While terms such as "offender" or "targeted" were used, it can be argued that the terms were used in the context of the law or through quoted sources. For instance, a 2010 article stated that "the law would...order offenders to enroll in a "citizenship course" to better understand French secularism" ("French 'burqa ban' goes before parliament," 2010). While "offenders" in an article referring to the facial covering ban as a

"burqa ban" implies the offenders are of Muslim descent, it is not necessarily coded language as it does not imply all individuals of Muslim descent are breaking the law ("French 'burqa ban' goes before parliament," 2010). On the contrary, "citizenship course" heavily implies that individuals breaking the law, within the context that the law is mainly targeted towards Muslims, are not true French citizens, thus emphasizing an "us" versus "them" dialogue, but this text is only quoted within articles as derived from the written law.

In a broader sense, coded language within the observed articles mainly stems from the language used in headlines. The aforementioned headlines indicating an Islamic focus for the ban also emphasize the government's targeted population, exacerbating the "us" versus "Them" dynamic between non-Muslim French individuals and Muslim citizens and immigrants. This dynamic is "inherent in the colonial attitude" France may still hold, and language use in French papers can have a large effect on audience perceptions, beliefs, and national identities over time (Lang, 2021).

Balanced Viewpoints

One way in which the media helps alleviate the "us" versus "them" dynamic is by exposing two or more sides of the facial covering or veil debate within the same article. Due to the political nature of the ban debate, articles tended to show the two extremes, with supporters and protestors given similar coverage time. For example, a French article, broadly titled "France bans the burqa" (2011) sourced police officers and two French Muslim women, both of whom were identified as "veil wearing." A second article by *AFP* presented a thorough array of sources, including three everyday French civilians, a majority of which were Muslim; Muslim

leaders from the Middle East, French scholars; and the "head of the Grand Mosque in Paris" ("Burqa ban riles French Muslim women, 2010).

Within American papers, French Muslims and American Muslims were both sourced. For instance, Saba's inclusion of two American sources and two European sources, along with each having one Muslim and one non-Muslim source each, shows diversity within sources. However, the article still held a ratio of three attitudes of disapproval to one approval of the ban and heavily showcased American national identity and a sense of patriotism between sources, with both American sources disagreeing with the ban on the basis of America's ideal of religious freedom. A CNN article sourced a French magazine's opinion poll, which found over half of its French readers supported the ban, before sourcing three French Muslims, including two veiled women, who all disapproved of the ban and its intentions ("France's burqa ban in effect next month," 2010).

Also due to the political foundations of the debate, political actors, including former-President Sarkozy and terrorist Osama Bin Laden were heavily sourced. For example, along with sourcing police officers and Muslim women, the aforementioned *AFP* article stated that Osama Bin Laden disapproved of the law and had "called for attacks," while Sarkozy is "accused of stigmatizing Islam to win back votes" from conservatives ("France bans the burqa," 2011). While Bin Laden's statements against the ban are newsworthy, his brief but aggressive quote in the article should be clarified by the author as an outlier source, not one which represents the mass feelings of French Muslims.

As seen in both French and American papers, strategically choosing sources helps provide a sense of objectivity and fulfills the journalistic tenet of providing a voice to the

voiceless, or in this case, providing a voice to Muslim individuals whose opinions may hold less value against French Catholics, the majority-religion.

Conclusion

A significant disclaimer regarding the findings includes each paper's existing biases, not including individual journalist biases, which may be implicit. *CNN* is considered a left-leaning newspaper, while the *New York Times* is slightly less left-leaning, and multiple media bias sites deem *AFP* as centered. The existence of media bias can have significant effects on the public agenda, as seen through the theme of "Islamic focus," which may affect public sentiment and audience beliefs and behaviors. This blends into other themes, including balanced viewpoints, as articles tended to rarely quote individuals with more nuanced stances on the issue, instead opting to interview only Muslims versus non-Muslims, and political leaders from democratic societies. Although news sources often provided sources on both sides of the issue, audiences are likely to side with the opinion that suits their current beliefs and values, including their sense of national identity.

Likewise, it is important to consider that, over the course of 2021 and 2022, conservative French presidential candidates have proposed a specific ban on hijabs in public spaces (Cohen, 2022). Further, Stanislas Guerini, a leader within French President Macron's suite, criticized a local politician who wore a hijab in a campaign photo in a series of tweets (Lang, 2021). While the contents herein are relevant to the initial 2010 law and 2011 effective date, media sources continue to cover current French politics with the country's secularist values in mind. Right-wing politicians covered by left-leaning news sources may therefore be more affected by biased

language, and it remains important for media sources to recognize bias and continue to search for sources that provide a spectrum of perspectives on similar issues.

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