

Islam and the Australian News Media

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Islam and the Australian News Media

Edited by Halim Rane, Jacqui Ewart and
Mohamad Abdalla



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MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS
An imprint of Melbourne University Publishing Limited
187 Grattan Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia
mup-info@unimelb.edu.au
www.mup.com.au

First published 2010
Text © remains with individual authors, 2010
Design and typography © Melbourne University Publishing Limited, 2010

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Text design by Phil Campbell
Cover design by Phil Campbell
Typeset by J & M Typesetting
Printed by Griffin Press, South Australia

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry
Islam and the Australian news media / editors, Halim Rane, Jacqui Ewart, Mohamad Abdalla.

9780522856408 (pbk)
9780522856392 (pdf)

Islamic studies series; 4.

Includes index.
Bibliography.

Islam—Press coverage—Australia.
Islam in mass media—Australia.
Islam and civil society—Australia.
Mass media—Objectivity—Australia.
Muslims—Australia—Attitudes.

Rane, Halim
Ewart, Jacqui
Abdalla, Mohamad

070.4492970994

Foreword

The social role and responsibilities of the media towards social harmony is a hotly debated topic. Is the media an agent of public education and social cohesion, or is it simply a business venture aimed at maximising profit? What is the relationship between media and freedom of expression? These and other related questions regarding control and ownership of the media have become even more pertinent following September 11 and subsequent terrorist attacks in Madrid, London and Bali. These tragic events have given rise to concerns about the dangers that may lurk in our own backyard. Suggestions that Australian Muslims may be a fifth column for Osama bin Laden have done serious damage to community relations. The insistence of the previous Australian government on distinct values that demarcate us from the rest implied an inherent incompatibility between Australian and Islamic values. The deliberate portrayal of Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers as queue-jumpers, people who deliberately break the law to gain entry into Australia, put even more strain on the reputation of the Muslim population. Many Muslims in Australia began to believe they were being accused of all sorts of mischief and anti-social behaviour. The pressure to recant for these assumed sins was compounded by the media's unbalanced coverage of Islam and Muslims.

The media are of course not a monolithic whole. The press, radio and TV each have their own constraints and *modus operandi*. In the case of the press alone, the oldest form of mass media, tabloid and broadsheet papers compete for a share of the readership. The governing principle is commercial, hence the problem with social responsibility. The tendency to sensationalise is the inevitable consequence of the need to attract attention, and sell. The broadsheet papers have tried to balance out the need for melodramatic stories with more thoughtful investigations, allowing for the wide diversity of Islam and Muslim experiences to gleam through. The overall picture that emerges, however, is less encouraging. One of the greatest disservices done by the various forms of the media is to ignore the diversity of Islam, focusing instead on a small minority of Muslims who break the law. This biased and simplistic approach to Islam carries major repercussions, given that the majority of Australians rely on the media to learn about Islam.

Finding a balance between social responsibility and maximising profits is certainly a difficult task, but it is imperative that we explore various options and alternatives, learn from our mistakes and improve on past practices. This collection offers a valuable critique of the media and its social impact.

Associate Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh
Islamic Studies Series Editor

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Preface

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, no minority religious community has captured media headlines as Muslims have in the West. Across Europe, in the US and in Australia, issues and events involving Islam and Muslims have been at the top of the news agenda for the past decade and are likely to continue to attract significant media attention in the foreseeable future. For most Westerners, the mass media are the primary source of information about this faith and its adherents. Western media have come to be seen as a central determinant of not only what is known about Islam, but also the primary influence on public perceptions of Muslims. The media are viewed as being instrumental in shaping attitudes towards Muslims and influencing inter-community relations between them and the wider society.

A number of books and articles, generally in the European and American contexts, have explored the relationship between Islam and the media. Research in the Australian context is relatively limited. With the exception of a few studies that have examined the representation of Muslims in the Australian media, important questions about the Australian media's reporting on Islam and Muslims and its impact on inter-community relations and the Muslim response remain unanswered. This book is the response of its contributors and editors to the lack of information about what has become a critical issue for not only the field of media studies, but also social relations. It provides valuable insights into the operational realities of reporting on Islam and Muslims, the representation of Muslims, the media's role in shaping relations between Australian Muslims and the broader community, and how Muslims are dealing with the media and their public image.

Islam and the Australian News Media brings together the insights, knowledge and experience of a range of contributors: academics of various disciplines, media researchers and journalists from across the socio-political spectrum. Blaming the media for what they perceive as a misunderstanding of Islam and public negativity towards Muslims has become a common catchcry among some sections of the community. More broadly, the credibility of certain media entities has been questioned by members of the general public,

scholars, and even journalists in the context of some media reporting of issues and events involving Muslim people. We are confident this book will be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of social and media researchers, students of journalism and media studies, journalists and other media personnel, and all those interested in media and social relations.

The editors wish to thank the academics and journalists who contributed to the book. The editors sincerely thank Gillian Warry for her work on the index for this book. We also wish to thank our families for their support and understanding during the editing process.

Halim Rane, Jacqui Ewart and Mohamad Abdalla

Contributors

Associate Professor Mohamad Abdalla is the Founding Director of the Griffith University Islamic Research Unit, Director of the Queensland Node of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies Australia, and an Associate Professor at the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance, Griffith University. Since 11 September 2001, Associate Professor Abdalla has played a leading role in building bridges of understanding between Australia's Muslim community and the wider Australian community.

Dr Tanja Dreher is an Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. She has researched and authored a number of studies on the Australian Muslim community.

Dr Jacqui Ewart is a senior lecturer in journalism and media studies at Griffith University. She previously worked as a journalist and media manager. She is author of *Haneef: A Question of Character*.

Dr Benjamin Isakhan is a Research Fellow with the Griffith Islamic Research Unit, part of the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance at Griffith University and affiliated with the National Centre for Excellence in Islamic Studies, Australia.

Professor Yan Islam is a political economist with more than 20 years of experience. He has published dozens of books and articles, as well as several reports for the United Nations.

Julie Posetti is a lecturer in journalism at the University of Canberra. She is a former award-winning journalist. She previously worked for the ABC.

Dr Halim Rane is the Deputy Director of the Griffith Islamic Research Unit and a lecturer in the National Centre of Excellence in Islamic Studies at Griffith University. He is author of *Reconstructing Jihad amid Competing International Norms* as well as the forthcoming *Islam and Contemporary Civilisation*.

Sarah Smiles Persinger was national security correspondent for *The Age* from January 2006 until February 2007. She was a Beirut-based freelance correspondent from 2002 until 2005.

Tom Switzer is a regular contributor to *Quadrant* magazine and the *Wall Street Journal*, and was opinion editor of *The Australian* newspaper from 2001 until 2008.

Introduction

Halim Rane, Jacqui Ewart and Mohamad Abdalla

Since the 1970s, the world has witnessed a social and political resurgence of Islam. Islam and its adherents have captured media headlines as some Muslim countries have become significant players in the global economy, as conflicts involving Muslims have intensified, and as Muslims have more confidently asserted their identity vis-à-vis the West. These patterns have continued and intensified during the early years of the twenty-first century. Concern for and curiosity about Islam has increased dramatically since the events of September 11. Issues and events involving Islam and Muslims continue to dominate the news agenda in the West. In Western countries, including Australia, the media have become the primary source of information about Islam and Muslims for an overwhelming majority of the public. There is a general perception that the media play a crucial role in influencing perceptions of Islam and having a negative impact on relations between Muslims and the wider society.

In spite of the central role played by the media in informing the West about Islam, relatively few books have specifically addressed the issue of the often vexed relationship between Islam, Muslims and the news media. Among the first was Edward Said's *Covering Islam*, published in 1981 and updated in 1997. Others include Kai

Hafez's *Islam and the West in the Mass Media*, published in 2000, and Elizabeth Poole's *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*, published in 2002. Most recently, the topic of Muslims and the Western media has been examined in Elizabeth Poole and John Richardson's *Muslims and the News Media*, published in 2006. The latter book mainly addresses the British context, but does contain a chapter by Peter Manning on the image of Muslims in Australia. Manning's 2006 book *Us and Them: An Australian Journalists' Investigation of Media, Muslims and the Middle East* provides further insights into these issues from the perspective of a senior journalist and commentator. There is also a growing number of reports, journal articles and documentaries that deal with these issues in the international context and to a much lesser extent the Australian setting. Absent from the literature is a comparable book that examines the question of Islam and the news media in the Australian context. A thorough understanding of the issues requires an examination from various perspectives, including historical perceptions of Islam in the West; the inner workings of the media and operational factors; media content and the representation of Muslims; the dynamics of inter-community relations; and the various ways in which Muslims are engaging with and responding to the Australian media. These issues are examined in chapters contained in this book, and in conjunction the chapters presented here provide rich and multifaceted insights into the complexities surrounding the news media and their coverage of Islam and Muslims.

Islam and the Australian News Media brings together the knowledge, experience and insights of academics, media researchers, journalists and editors. The central aim of this book is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the *how, why* and *now what* of covering Islam, media content, and its impact on social relations. This book is divided into five parts, structured to familiarise the reader with the media and Muslims in the Australian context; provide perspectives on the newsworthiness of Islam; analyse the representation of Muslims and its impact on inter-community relations; examine the sources, agendas and responses associated with the coverage of Muslims; and explore the question of the media's role as the fourth estate in the context of covering Islam.

Chapter structure

In Part I, Ben Isakhan, Mohamad Abdalla and Sara Smiles Persinger set the scene through their thorough and insightful explorations of the Australian media and the Muslim community. In chapter 1, Isakhan draws on his expertise in Middle Eastern history and Western philosophical thought, presenting an ambitious chapter that traces the origins of Orientalist discourse from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe to the beginnings of the Australian press. He identifies the parallels between this discourse and the most contemporary representations of Islam and Muslims in the Australian news media. Isakhan documents that a key challenge for those working for the Australian news media is firstly to recognise the extent to which Orientalist thought influences the reporting of Islam and Muslims and then to transcend the centuries-old view of this faith and its adherents as a threatening other.

A central focus of this book, the Australian Muslim community, is discussed in chapter 2. Drawing on his knowledge of Australian Muslim communities gained through many years of community service, Abdalla provides an in-depth look at the history and diversity of Muslims in Australia. He highlights that fact that a vast range of settlement experiences, as well as national, ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic, general and ideological differences make the Australian Muslim community a complex phenomenon. This chapter should cause journalists, commentators and policy-makers to pause before making generalisations about Islam or any community as diverse as that of Muslims in Australia.

Following these chapters, which provide essential background for readers, chapter 3 by Smiles Persinger addresses the other central focus of this book: the Australian news media. Years of experience as a journalist with some of the country's most prominent media organisations are reflected in her analysis of the inner workings of the Australian media and the practical realities involved in the reporting of issues and events involving Islam and Muslims. Smiles Persinger examines the oft-repeated claim that the media are responsible for the negative image of Islam in Australia. Her framework of analysis encompasses intra-media competition, space and time constraints of news production, conflicts within the Muslim community, and the more general public discourse about Islam and terrorism that has

been forged through such events as September 11, the Bali bombings and the London bombings. Balancing her analysis, Smiles Persinger weighs the media's often extensive reporting of extreme and unrepresentative Muslim views against the media's failure to cover international events in a comprehensive way, give sufficient context to Muslim concerns and actions, and present the diversity of Muslim views and identities.

Part II of *Islam and the Australian News Media* explores the issues of media representation of Muslims and the impact of this representation on inter-community relations. In chapter 4, Julie Posetti presents the findings of her research on Muslim women in Australia. She discusses the media representation of Muslim women as perceived by Muslim women. Posetti shows that Muslim women are under-represented in the media, both as makers and as sources of news. Conversely, Muslim women are over-represented in media content as symbols of an Islamic threat and victims of oppression.

Chapter 5, by Halim Rane, takes the issue of media representation to the next logical level and explores the relationship between media coverage of Islam and relations between Muslims and the wider Australian society. Based on the findings of a survey on the public's media use, knowledge of Islam, interactions with Muslims and attitudes towards Muslims, this chapter reveals that while the media are the primary source of information about Islam and Muslims, this does not necessarily translate into negative attitudes towards them. Rane contends that direct interaction with Muslim people is an effective means of improving inter-community relations and offsetting the impact of pejorative representations of Islam in the media. He also highlights that widespread perceptions that the media lack credibility have fostered scepticism among the Australian public on issues concerning Muslims and thereby reduced the extent of the impact that negative media representations of Islam and Muslims may otherwise have on inter-community relations.

Part III of this book refocuses attention on media operations and examines the newsworthiness of Islam from the perspective of a media-insider and through a political-economy framework. Chapter 6, written by former opinion editor of *The Australian*, Tom Switzer, addresses what its author refers to as one of the world's most intractable problems: conservative Islam and its clash with Western identity. Arguing that Muslim integration in the West is the central

challenge, Switzer attempts to demonstrate that *The Australian* has maintained balance in its reporting of Islamic and Muslim issues. He provides insights into three cases that have grabbed public attention in recent years: Sheikh Hilali's comments about women and sexual assault, the Cronulla riots and the federal government's anti-terror laws.

Chapter 7, by Yan Islam, offers a counter-narrative to that presented by Switzer. Islam demonstrates that the Australian media, and *The Australian* in particular, reinforces existing anti-Muslim prejudice. Analysing recent reportage by *The Australian*, Islam identifies an 'Islamophobic' tendency in the newspaper's reporting. He argues that the political climate that developed in the wake of September 11 facilitated an atmosphere in which selective, prejudicial and stereotypical reporting of Islam and Muslims not only persists, but often passes as objective journalism because it does not incur political or social sanctions.

Part IV explores sources of news, news agendas and the responses of the Muslim community. Chapter 8 discusses the role of talkback radio as a forum for discussing Islam and Muslims. Breaking from the conventional approach to studying talkback radio—which tends to focus on formats, hosts and their relationship with callers—Jacqui Ewart and Julie Posetti discuss the emerging function of talkback radio as a space where issues of identity and belonging are conceptualised. A significant contribution of Ewart and Posetti's research is their identification of the ways that Muslims are using talkback radio to articulate their own identity and respond to community concerns about their faith and fellow Muslims. Their chapter highlights the largely untapped potential of talkback radio to advance cross-cultural communication and understanding.

Chapter 9, written by Tanja Dreher, takes an even deeper look at Muslims' response to the media representation of their faith and its followers. Dreher discusses the diverse range of strategies pursued by Muslims to address their concerns with the media, including media monitoring and complaints processes, media-skills training, media advocacy work, training journalists and relationship-building with media personnel. Such initiatives have resulted in improved relations between Muslims and certain media, more objective and accurate reporting, and more diversity in terms of Muslim voices and issues covered in the media. Dreher, however, contends that news agendas

and conventions have remained largely unchanged and that Muslims continue to be covered as the 'other'.

Part V of this book deals directly with the question of the media's function in society: the fourth estate, or the role of the media to act as check on the government, executive and judiciary. In chapter 10, Jacqui Ewart examines this critical issue through a detailed examination of the case of Dr Mohamed Haneef, an Indian doctor arrested and detained without charge under Australia's anti-terror laws. Ewart disputes the notion that the media's performance on the Haneef case was an example of exceptional journalism that lived up to the fourth-estate ideal. She contends that any kudos that could be accorded to the media is largely due to the work of two journalists, while the media overall lacked self-reflexivity and a willingness among journalists to take a line opposed to that of their colleagues.

Taking stock of the insights and findings of the book's ten chapters, the conclusion of the book outlines a way forward for the news media, Muslim community and Australian society.