Countering Islamophobic media representations: the potential role of peace journalism

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Representations of Muslims in the Australian media have been routinely stereotyped, failed to reflect the diversity of origin, outlook and aspiration of Muslim Australians, and have negatively impacted upon perceptions of Islam and treatment of Muslims by non-Muslim Australians. This article explores findings from a study involving content and discourse analysis of representations of Muslims in Australian broadsheet newspapers. Lower levels of Islamophobia in news articles within the sample were associated with a ‘peace journalism’ approach to reporting. Peace journalism promotes the contextualisation of conflict narratives and challenges dominant news conventions such as the focus on elite, bureaucratic sources. It is therefore suggested that potentially fruitful strategies for countering Islamophobia in the news media could include the adoption of standards for conflict reporting and expanding opportunities for Peace Journalism in reporting on issues relating to Muslims and Islam.

*Keywords*: Islamophobia, representations of Islam, race and racism, Australian politics, peace journalism, conflict reporting, election reporting, media reform

Following the events of September 11, 2001, Islamophobic attitudes and acts, enacted on a variety of institutional and quotidian levels, were to severely impact upon Australian Muslim communities and created significant damage to communal harmony and social cohesion. This culminated in widely publicised ‘race riots’ at Sydney’s Cronulla Beach in 2005. Although there have not been further outbreaks of large-scale direct violence between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians, inter-communal tensions continue to simmer and incidences of direct and structural violence directed towards Australian Muslims have recently risen in frequency and severity. This phenomenon has in large part been traceable to the return to power of a conservative government in 2013, which has sought to deflect attention from its unpopular economic policies through a renewed focus on generating fear and anxiety regarding Muslims and Muslim communities in Australia amid the context of a global resurgence of Islamophobia (Anderson, 2014; McDonald & Fay-Ramirez, 2015).

The media has consistently been identified by Australian Muslims as ‘a central social institution contributing to experiences of fear and exclusion among targeted communities’ (Dreher, 2006: 36). Numerous studies since 2001 have
found that representations of Muslims in the Australian media have been routinely stereotyped, failed to reflect the diversity of origin, outlook and aspiration of Muslim Australians, and have had significant negative impacts upon the perception of Islam and treatment of Muslims by non-Muslim Australians (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005; Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales, 2003; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004; Pickering, McCulloch, Wright-Neville, & Lentini, 2007; Poynting & Perry, 2007; Rane, Ewart, & Abdalla, 2010). In 2004, Australia’s Human Rights Commission conducted extensive research on anti-Muslim discrimination, during the course of which they asked Australian Muslims to discuss examples of racism they had experienced. ‘I think the media is the main cause’, one respondent said, ‘because kids are picking on Muslims at school and these kids get it from their parents and their parents get it from the media’ (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004: 145). Surveying the responses of participants in such studies, Mykonos and Watmough concluded that ‘the media, collectively, represents for many Muslims and people of Middle Eastern background an important site of racism’ (2007: 7).

This article draws upon the findings of a study whose core research question was to investigate the ways in which changes in representations of Muslims are manifested, concentrating on the content of news reporting as a social artefact and comparing two key periods – the build-up to the Australian Federal elections of 2004 and 2007 respectively (Anderson, 2014b).¹ This study enabled a deeper understanding of how patterns of representing Muslims shifted between these two key periods, as well as generating insights into strategies which could successfully disrupt or contest negative reporting patterns. One of the key findings which emerged from this study was a marked relationship between reporting patterns which were consonant with a ‘Peace Journalism’ approach to news reporting and lower levels of ‘Islamophobia’. In contrast, higher levels of Islamophobia were associated with reportage patterns consonant with ‘war/violence journalism’. Proponents of Peace Journalism describe ‘war/violence journalism’ as reporting which is characterised by elite

¹ This study constituted part of the research towards my doctoral thesis, which was submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney, Australia.
orientations, ignoring causes/outcomes, a focus on visible effects of direct violence, and zero-sum orientations (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Lynch et al., 2001; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005).

Although the primary focus of this study was on the evaluation and comparison of levels of Islamophobia between different time periods and different publications, there were clear indications from the study that ‘peace journalism’ approaches to reporting issues related to Muslims and Islam played an important role in dispelling stereotypes and combating Islamophobia. Given the significance attributed to the media by Muslim individuals and communities as a site for the promulgation and perpetuation of Islamophobia, and the clear disruptions to community harmony and cohesion which have resulted from the growth of Islamophobia in Australia, it is important to explore the potential offered by peace journalism for combating Islamophobia and wider societal conflict.

This paper will therefore set out the background to the study before outlining the findings of the study in regards to ‘peace journalism’ and ‘war journalism’. I will then investigate the and explore the potential role of peace journalism for altering reporting patterns in such a way as to reduce Islamophobic representations in new reporting and potentially assist in redressing wider societal conflict.

The Rise of Islamophobia in Australia

Although Muslims in Australia have been subjected to discrimination and prejudice since at least the late nineteenth century, anti-Muslim prejudice did not gain significant prominence in Australian public discourse until the early 1980s (Dunn, 2001; Isakhan, 2010; Kabir, 2006). This was a result of both the growth of the Muslim population in Australia during this period, and a burst of interest in Islam and Muslims among Western journalists, politicians and the public, largely as a response to key international events such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the First Palestinian Intifada in 1987 (Esposito, 2011; Said, 1997). Indeed, despite the still negligible size of the Australian Muslim
community, Muslims were among the four most discriminated against minority groups in Australia by 1991 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1991). From the early 1990s, it then becomes possible to document the emergence of sustained and politically condoned anti-Muslim prejudice in Australia, which we can more clearly label as ‘Islamophobia’ (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004).

By mid-2001, the potential for extracting political capital through scapegoating of the Muslim community was therefore substantial. At this point in time, the governing Liberal/National Coalition was languishing in the polls, just months away from the next election, when two significant events happened to change its fortunes. One was the course towards Australian coastal waters set by the MV Tampa, a Norwegian freighter that had picked up over 400 Afghan refugees from a sinking ship. Australia denied entry to the Tampa, and within days the Coalition had passed a new Border Protection Bill which played to the fears of a well primed electorate (Errington & van Onselen, 2007). Just weeks later came the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11. Australian Prime Minister John Howard happened to be in Washington at the time. His personal experience strongly impressed upon him the significance of the event not just for the US, but for global politics (Fidler, 2011). He and his government subsequently capitalised upon the new fear of ‘terrorism’ to place still more emphasis on ‘border protection’ and ‘national security’ as the key issue of the 2001 election – and were returned to Federal Government by a landslide.

During this period, the two separate phenomena – asylum seekers and ‘terrorism’ – came to be conflated in political and media accounts, as ‘threats’ to Australia. Media content analytical studies have repeatedly demonstrated the forging of linkages between asylum seekers, terrorism and Muslims. Peter Manning, for example, shows that in newspaper articles published in Sydney between 2000 and 2002 which referred to refugees or asylum-seekers, fully 37% also contained references to ‘terrorism’; furthermore, he found that ‘threat concepts’ such as fundamentalist terrorism were strongly associated with Muslims and Islam (2004: 12). Social psychological research during the past
ten years has similarly demonstrated strong correlative relationships between negative attitudes towards asylum seekers, fear of terrorism, and prejudice against Muslims. In some studies these traits were also strongly related to low levels of personal experiences with asylum seekers or Muslims, leading researchers to contend that political and media accounts were playing a significant role in the dissemination and legitimisation of ‘false beliefs’ concerning asylum seekers and Muslims (Pedersen, Watt, & Griffiths, 2007).

This phenomenon is of course not limited to Australia. Indeed, as Dunn et al. have observed, ‘the unreasonableness and defamatory effect of media portrayals of Islam [have become] a recurring theme of any contemporary ethnographic work with Muslims in western countries’ (2007: 582). There are, however, particularly clear connections between the political agenda and fortunes of the conservative Liberal/Coalition Government led by Prime Minister John Howard, and the rise of mediatised anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic discourses in Australia following the events of September 11, 2001. These developments fit neatly into the pattern described by Murray Edelman (1988) as ‘political spectacle’. Spectacles enable political control to be exerted through the creation of ‘mediated dramas’ that both invoke and reinforce syndromes of ‘psychological distancing’. These can produce an ‘roused response’, based on fear and anxiety, to issues expedient to the author(s) of the drama, while distracting public attention from other issues less likely to build political support for their cause. This strategy can be successful because ‘to personify an issue by identifying it with an enemy wins support for a political stand while masking the material advantages the perception provides’ (1988: 68).

At some point during the middle of the last decade, however, this pattern shifted. Prime Minister John Howard lost not only the Federal Election of 2007, but even his own seat, as a Labor government took office with apparent commitments to unravel some of the certitudes of its predecessor. The incoming government pledged that child asylum seekers would no longer to be kept locked up in detention centres. Australian troops in Iraq were brought home from a theatre of war Labor said they should never have entered in the first place. For a while, under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Australia even appeared to be moving
towards a more even-handed approach on a totemic issue to some in the Muslim community, namely the Israel-Palestine conflict (Lynch, 2011).

Although the incoming government did not ultimately deliver upon all of its promises, the late 2000s were characterised by a marked subsidence of racist attacks upon Muslim individuals and communities and a muting of Islamophobic rhetoric in Australian political discourse, in comparison to the heightened tensions of the mid-2000s – the context within which the Cronulla Riots had occurred. The study upon which this article is based therefore sought to explore the characteristics of media reporting during two key points within this period: the 2004 Federal Election campaign, during which the Howard Government and its exclusionary rhetoric were still largely unquestioned within the mainstream media, and the 2007 Federal Election campaign, when a more critical lens was being applied to understanding and analysing the failures of the ‘War on Terror’ and to acknowledging the detrimental effect upon Australian society of anti-Muslim ‘dog-whistle’ politics and policies (Fear, 2007; Manning, 2004).

**Parameters of the Study**

This study included content and discourse analysis of articles published by the Australian broadsheet daily newspapers *The Sydney Morning Herald* (*The SMH*) and *The Australian*. Broadsheet press are oriented towards the reproduction or interrogation of political discourses, and their production is geared towards elites, in particular political and media elites (Conley & Lamble, 2006; Economou & Tanner, 2008; Simons, 2007; Young, 2011). The broadsheet press have traditionally played a leading role in agenda-setting and the definition of ‘news-worthiness’ for the broader mass media, a function currently in some decline, but still a significant source of influence for these two publications during the mid 2000s (Knight, 2007; Pearson, Brand, Archbold, & Rane, 2001; Young, 2011). Whilst neither of the two newspapers selected can be said to be consistently ‘politically partisan’ as such, they routinely endorse one party in electoral contests, and are demarcated in terms of ideological and
cultural orientation, with *The SMH* generally considered centre left and *The Australian* perceived as right of centre (Griffen-Foley, 2003).

The material for analysis was selected through Factiva online archive searches on articles published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*, during a time period of one month prior to each of the 2004 and the 2007 Federal Elections. The exact time frames of the study were 12th September – 9th October 2004 and 28th October – 24th November 2007 respectively. The search criteria used were the date range of twenty-eight days (four weeks) prior to the elections, coupled with the keywords ‘Islam OR Islamist OR Islamism OR Muslim OR Muslims’.

Articles were considered for analysis if they could be determined as being largely *about* Islam or Muslims (e.g. Islam as a religion, or a Muslim person, organisation or country), following Richardson’s conventions for sample selection in analysis of representations of Muslims in the media (2006). Articles from all sections of the publication were analysed, including ‘soft news’ pieces such editorials, opinion pieces, letters to the editors, as well as traditional ‘hard news’ stories.

The full sample of articles analysed in this study included a total of 373 news stories. The distribution across the four data sets was as follows:

I. *The Australian* – 2004 Election (128 articles)
II. *The Australian* – 2007 Election (127 articles)
III. *The SMH* – 2004 Election (68 articles)
IV. *The SMH* – 2007 Election (50 articles)

The differences in density of articles between the two newspapers and across the two different time periods clearly indicate that Islam and issues related to Muslims featured far more strongly in *The Australian* in the lead-up to both the 2004 and 2007 elections, but still had a significant presence in *The SMH*. For both publications, the number of articles relating to Muslims or Islam was higher in 2004 than in 2007.
To illustrate variations within and between the different data sets, all 373 articles were coded according to their following physical characteristics and to a range of other characteristics including quotation patterns and further in-depth critical discourse analytical techniques were employed upon selected subsets of the data. This article will provide an overview of the results, focussing particularly the results of an analysis of all 373 articles via the tool of an ‘Islamophobic Index’ which was created for the purposes of this study.

The definition of Islamophobia utilised as the basis for this Index was that which was developed by the British social equity think thank the Runnymede Trust (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 1997). The Trust’s influential report Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All defined Islamophobia as ‘an unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims’. This report further characterised ‘Islamophobia’ as a constellation of eight aspects of ‘closed’ views towards Islam, including the perception of Islam as a monolithic, static bloc; as separate and ‘other’; as inferior to ‘the West’; as violent and engaged in a ‘clash of civilisations’ with the West; and as primarily a political ideology rather than a religious faith. The final three dimensions were the dismissal of criticisms of ‘the West’ made by Muslims; the justification of discriminatory treatment of Muslims, and the normalisation of anti-Muslim hostility (1997: 4).

This conceptualisation of Islamophobia has become widely accepted and utilised not only in the UK but internationally in a variety of contexts (Aslan, 2009; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2006; Runnymede Trust, 2007; Vakil, 2010). Despite criticisms and difficulties in operationalising this definition of Islamophobia, the Runnymede Trust’s formulation of Islamophobia encompasses a variety of typical essentialist, new-racism and Orientalist aspects of anti-Muslim sentiment and is acknowledged as providing a useful baseline for assessing the presence of ‘Islamophobic’ aspects of media discourse (Allen, 2010). Abdalla et al. note that ‘any genuine attempt by the media or journalists to challenge and eliminate prejudice in
reporting against Islam and Muslims would require an appreciation of these identifiers [of Islamophobia] (2010: 235).

Table 1 includes a list of the eight indicators of ‘closed’ views of Islam and eight indicators of ‘open’ views of Islam, which were derived from the Runnymede Trust’s characterisation of Islamophobia and were utilised as the basis for coding categories for Islamophobic frames.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame Descriptor/Dimension</th>
<th>Closed views of Islam</th>
<th>Open views of Islam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Monolithic / diverse</td>
<td>Islam seen as a single monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to new realities.</td>
<td>Islam seen as diverse and progressive, with internal differences, debates and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Separate / interacting</td>
<td>Islam seen as separate and other – (a) not having any aims or values in common with other cultures (b) not affected by them (c) not influencing them.</td>
<td>Islam seen as interdependent with other faiths and cultures – (a) having certain shared values and aims (b) affected by them (c) enriching them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Inferior / different</td>
<td>Islam seen as inferior to the West – barbaric, irrational, primitive, sexist.</td>
<td>Islam seen as distinctively different, but not deficient, and as equally worthy of respect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Enemy / partner</td>
<td>Islam seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, engaged in ‘a clash of civilisations’.</td>
<td>Islam seen as an actual or potential partner in joint cooperative enterprises and in the solution of shared problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Manipulative / sincere</td>
<td>Islam seen as a political ideology, used for political or military advantage.</td>
<td>Islam seen as a genuine religious faith, practised sincerely by its adherents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Criticism of West rejected / considered</td>
<td>Criticisms made by Islam and Muslims of ‘the West’ rejected out of hand.</td>
<td>Criticisms of ‘the West’ and other cultures are considered and debated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Discrimination defended / criticised</td>
<td>Hostility towards Islam used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society.</td>
<td>Debates and disagreements with Islam do not diminish efforts to combat discrimination and exclusion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. Islamophobia seen as natural / problematic

Anti-Muslim hostility accepted as natural and ‘normal’.

Critical views of Islam are themselves subjected to critique, lest they be inaccurate and unfair.

Table 1: Islamophobic frames (from Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 1997)

These eight indicators were utilised to elicit which frames – whether open or closed views of Islam – dominated the narrative within each article. Stories were scored as Open, Closed, or Neutral on each of the eight frame descriptor dimensions. A rating scale was subsequently applied which aggregated the scores of open or closed views on the eight different dimensions and produced an index of Islamophobia, therefore enabling comparison of large numbers of articles.

Results

Notable differences between the two election periods and between the two newspapers were identified through my analysis, demonstrating that the Islamophobic Index proved capable of illuminating significant distinctions in the representation of a wide range of issues and stories pertaining to Islam and Muslims in the Australian press. ‘Closed’ views of Islam were more prevalent in 2004 than in 2007, and in The Australian than in The SMH. Similarly, articles more frequently identified Islam as a ‘problem’ in 2004 than in 2007, and The Australian than in The SMH.

As can be seen in Table 2, the Summed Scores for ratings on the eight dimensions of the Islamophobic Index reveal clear differences between the two different time periods and the two different newspapers. Overall, the highest proportion of articles with negative sum totals, that is, articles which were classified as being characterised by ‘closed’ views towards Islam and Muslims, were found in The Australian in 2004 (66%), followed by The Australian in 2007 (48%), then The SMH in 2004 (38%) and The SMH in 2007 (24%). The highest proportion of articles with positive summed scores, that is, articles which were classified as characterised by ‘open’ views towards Islam and Muslims, were
found in reverse order, with *The SMH* in 2007 (64%) and 2004 (50%) followed by *The Australian* in 2007 (47%) and *The Australian* in 2004 (25%).

In fact, the proportions of closed to open articles in *The Australian* in 2004 (66% closed, 25% open) are almost exactly the inverse of the proportions of open to closed articles in *The SMH* in 2007 (64% open, 24% closed). The proportion of stories which were coded as ‘neutral’ was quite similar across the four data sets, ranging from 9% to 13% in *The Australian*, and being exactly 12% in both 2004 and 2007 for *The SMH*.

![Summed Scores](image)

*Table 2: Islamophobic Index - Summed Scores as a percentage of total articles per data set*

Although I did find that there were fewer articles from *The SMH* in 2007 which were classified as ‘closed’ and more which were classified as ‘open’ in 2004 than was found for articles from *The Australian* from 2004, there were still more closed articles and fewer open articles in *The Australian* in 2007 than in *The SMH* in 2004. In other words, although there was a significant decrease in the levels of ‘Islamophobic’ representations of Islam and Muslims in *The Australian* between 2004 and 2007, the levels of Islamophobia identified in this study were
still higher in *The Australian* in 2007 than they were in *The SMH* at the height of the ‘War on Terror’ in 2004. Despite the significant increase in ‘open’ views towards Islam and decrease in ‘closed’ views towards Islam and Muslims, it is notable that even in the data set with the highest levels of ‘open’ articles, *The SMH* in 2007, almost a quarter of the articles were still classified as being characterised by ‘closed’ towards Islam and Muslims.

The results of the coding of articles upon the Islamophobic Index indicated that an exercise in content analysis using, as the model for evaluative criteria, a Likert scale based on the Runnymede Trust definition of Islamophobia, was able to highlight and pinpoint significant shifts in representational patterns. The period leading up to the election of 2004 saw more Islamophobia than the equivalent period of 2007; and *The Australian* was more Islamophobic than *The SMH* – albeit with important exceptions on individual stories.

For both publications, during the 2007 election campaign there was increased media contestation of the signature method of the Howard government, of fomenting and exploiting xenophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment. Having demonstrated the utility of the Islamophobic Index in differentiating between levels of Islamophobia and features of representations of Muslims across different time periods and publications, I then sought to explore what characterised articles in these different subsets in order to understand what techniques might be applied to reducing Islamophobic discourses in future reporting.

**Further analysis**

Studies of racism in the media have frequently found that ethnic or racial minorities appear in a relatively small proportion of press articles, and when they are present, they are largely represented in negative ways or are spoken ‘for’ rather than being quoted directly (Teo, 2000; van Dijk, 2008; Wilson & Gutiérrez, 1995). Many studies analysing stereotypes or negative representatives of ethnic minorities have further focussed on investigating the issue of minority or other outgroups being frequently represented as a ‘problem’
in the news media (Lynch, 2008). This method of analysing representations of minorities builds upon the findings of Galtung and Ruge's classic study, in which they demonstrated that 'news' is traditionally focussed upon problems rather than solutions (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

In this study, I found that from the four data sets analysed, Islam was identified as a 'problem' most frequently in *The Australian* in 2004. 30% of articles in this publication at this time were coded as explicitly representing Islam as a 'problem'. In contrast, the lowest percentage of articles identifying Islam as a problem, and the highest percentage of articles which specifically identified an alternative problem or no problem at all were from *The SMH* in 2007. Rather unsurprisingly, there was a correlative relationship between articles which represented Islam as a 'problem' and articles which were highly Islamophobic.

As has been established in much of the literature on Islam and the Media, the linkage between Islam and violence is particularly widespread, with the majority of this emphasis characterised by a conflation of terrorism and Islam. The proportion of articles on the three subjects of counter terrorism and national security, terrorist violence, and violent conflict in Islamic countries was highest for *The Australian* in 2007 and lowest for *The SMH* in 2007. Within the category of 'violence and Islam', the proportion of articles on the different subjects within this broader category of Islam and violent conflict differed significantly. In *The Australian* in 2004, for example, 'terrorist violence' was the subject of a full 23% of the stories; in 2007, by contrast, 'terrorist violence' was the subject of just 2% of the stories – exactly the same proportion as for *The SMH* in the same year.

The proportionally high number of stories on 'terrorist violence' in 2004 did not necessarily reflect an extremely high number of individual terrorist attacks or incidences of violence. Instead, it reflected an overwhelming number of articles reporting on slightly different aspects or developments of a limited number of actual incidents, in particular the aftermath of the Jakarta Embassy bombing.

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2Articles were coded as having identified an alternative problem if they framed, for example, a specific Islamic practice, or a specific Muslim person or organisation as a 'problem', but explicitly distinguished between Islam as a religion or Muslims as a whole and the specified 'problem'.
which occurred on September 9th 2004, just prior to the start of the period under analysis.

Articles discussing matters such as terrorist violence, which generally had a preponderance of Islamophobic frames, were characterised by a lack of contextualising information which would make the violence that was being reported explicable in any way. In very few articles from either publication or time period did articles directly cite the views and perspectives of Muslims other than extremists: quotations from Muslims were more frequently from extreme clerics or militants than from ordinary Muslims, and were often utilised to bolster Islamophobic arguments rather than to give voice to Muslim perspectives.

The effect of the high levels of negative reporting of Muslims and strong association with violence in much news reporting in this period was summed up in a feature article from The SMH in 2004 by Joseph Wakim, former Multicultural Affairs Commissioner on the impact of anti-Muslim and anti-prejudice (Wakim, 2004). Titled ‘Any Tom, Dick or Harry can Beat Prejudice’, the article refers to the common prejudice directed against people with Muslim or Arab names and the resultant pressure upon members of these communities to Anglicise their names in order to achieve parity in the job market and escape constant attacks on the basis of their ethno-religious background:

Many are fed up with having to constantly fend off knee-jerk reactions, prejudices, phobias and pregnant pauses from some who immediately associate recognisable Arabic and Islamic names with the terrorism that dominates our news. The pre-emptive defence becomes a mantra. No, I am not a terrorist. No, I was not born overseas. No, I do not support al-Qaeda…As each terrorist attack and hostage beheading adds another layer to the entrenched Arabic and Islamic stereotype, those bearing the names and thus bearing the brunt feel more entrenched in their fear that they will never have a fair go (2004: 17).

Wakim’s article is an important example of the way that the weight of negative reporting combines to create an atmosphere in which Australian Muslims are marginalised and excluded, and the way that negative international events involving Muslims come to impact upon and be attributed collectively to all Muslims.
It is difficult for the consumer of news to feel detached, when reading story after story about such tragic events, especially when the violence depicted is predominantly framed as irrational, unrelenting and unstoppable. In 2004 in particular, the suggestion that there were potential causes, or any solutions other than warfare, for the ‘cycle of violence’ in which Muslims were implicated, was frequently lampooned and demonised. The potential for hopeful responses to conflict narratives, or for empathy for the people involved in them, were rare inclusions in the articles surveyed. Fortunately, it was quite a changed landscape during the lead up to the 2007 election. The proliferation of opinion pieces, leaders and letters ridiculing and refuting any criticism of the War on Terror, so apparent in both newspapers in 2004, was notably absent in The SMH in 2007, and there were very few stories of this ilk in The Australian in 2007.

One of the major shifts in reporting on Islam and violent conflict between 2004 and 2007 was that the number of articles specifically covering terrorist violence or attacks was greatly reduced in 2007, yet the number of articles on issues related to counter terrorism and national security increased. Many of these articles do not simply report upon the introduction of anti-terrorist measures in different countries or on the proceedings of counter terrorism legal cases, but an increasingly significant subset of articles reflected critically upon anti-terrorism legislation in Australia and its deleterious impacts upon Muslim individuals and communities. Although the overall context remained negative, in that the linkage between Muslims and violence was maintained in such stories, the more critical approach to the War on Terror and its impacts upon all countries involved is notable.

Even in 2007, however, the voicing of extremely Islamophobic attitudes was still acceptable in The Australian, and publication of ‘somewhat closed’ views of Islam and Muslims were still commonplace in The SMH. The fact that ‘extreme’ views were still able to be accommodated within the spectrum of views represented in The Australian in 2007 indicates that in Daniel Hallin’s terms, whilst the boundaries of the ‘zone of legitimate controversy’ on the
subject of Islam and Muslims may have shifted somewhat between the two periods, the shift did not make extremely Islamophobic perspectives so ‘deviant’ that they could no longer be printed within the paper (1989, p. 117).

What might account for the shifts in representational patterns between the two periods and the two newspapers? The effect of shifts in the wider political context may have been accentuated by the newspapers coming under implicit pressure to respond to well-attested criticisms of their unfair, unbalanced and inflammatory reporting on issues related to Islam and Muslims in the mid-2000s. One of the responsive strategies of The Australian was to commission features from prominent Muslims in order to address these accusations, and to emphasise its traditional record for adversarial journalism (Switzer, 2010).

In regards to the commissioning of features, the commitment of The Australian to the principle of ‘balance’ meant that printing positive stories about Islam made the continued printing of extremely negative stories about Islam justifiable – with such oppositional opinion pieces often printed on the same page to underscore the newspaper’s ‘balance’. The printing of ‘soft news’ articles which included more open views towards Islam and Muslims and the celebration of individual hard news stories which exemplified ‘Fourth Estate’ values therefore did not seem to be matched by any commitment to address the entrenched patterns of Islamophobic representations which I found strongly characteristic of articles from The Australian surveyed in this study.

In contrast, The SMH responded to criticisms of its coverage of issues related to Islam and Muslims by initiating a project called ‘Faces of Islam’ in early 2007. The paper commissioned and ran a series of special articles which according to senior reporter Hamish McDonald was explicitly aimed at ‘reader education’ and required journalists to ‘get back to basics’. The commissioned articles considered ‘how the Muslim community arrived in Australia, what kind of lifestyles and beliefs, [and] ethnic flavours are represented here’, and reportedly acted as ‘quite an education for the staff who worked on it’ (cited in Lynch, 2008: 172). This project, which developed journalistic understanding of the diversity of Muslim communities in Australia and emphasised critical reflection on the
part of journalists, may be assumed to have played a role in the shift in patterns of representation which I found in articles in my sample from this paper in 2007.

In reference to this project, Lynch argued that ‘it is when journalists and news organisations question [representational] conventions – go “back to basics”, in McDonald’s words – that exertions of definitional power are more likely to be supplemented with a greater openness and plurality’ (2008: 173). The ‘Faces of Islam’ project therefore had arguably far-reaching and holistic impacts upon the orientation of the newspaper towards reporting on Islam and Muslims. In contrast, the strategies of *The Australian* were in the end superficial and limited in their impact: the excellence of occasional individual feature articles or exposés stands in stark contrast to the conformity to traditional news values and an unchallenged overall tendency towards negative reporting on Islam and Muslims.

**Countering Islamophobia in the Media**

The contemporary media landscape is one in which there exists considerable opportunity for transformation of existing mainstream and alternative media, as well as potentially altering the relationships between the two, as emphasised by Elissa Tivona:

> I argue that the timing for a new journalistic framework could not be better. Established news agencies and global networks are hungry to reinvent themselves, especially given intense pressure created by the internet’s ease of alternative information delivery (Tivona, 2011, p. p. 341).

Tivona advocates wider adoption of a ‘peace journalism’ model for reform of existing media outlets, encouraging journalists to move away from representations of ‘intractable conflict’ – a ‘war journalism’ approach to reporting. Instead, she urges, we should ‘push for the strong amplification of healing and revealing news: stories of peace and reconciliation between former warriors and perceived enemies’ (2011: 341).

Narratives of violent conflict had a significant impact upon the escalation and entrenchment of Islamophobic representations in articles I analysed in the
course of this study. Given this linkage, strategies which are specifically targeted towards combating the stereotypes and negativity characteristic of traditional conflict reporting and combating the feelings of despair and hopelessness which they can evoke in their audience will likely have strong concomitant effects on reducing the preponderance and impact of ‘closed’ views of Islam in ‘hard news’ reporting.

Peace journalism advocates the ‘iteration and exploration of backgrounds and contexts’, in order to support ‘the provision of cues to form negotiated and/or oppositional readings of war propaganda, and the coverage of suggestions and initiatives for peace, from whatever quarter’ (Lynch, 2008: 143). Peace journalism furthermore promotes the contextualisation of conflict narratives, directs attention to the challenging of dominant news conventions such as the focus on elite, bureaucratic sources, and interrogates the assumptions of the ‘regime of objectivity’ in mainstream journalism. Finally, peace journalism aims to supply ‘opportunities for readers and audiences to activate their empathic capacities’, through the humanisation of actors in conflict narratives (Lynch et al., 2011: 18-19).

Many of these features of peace journalism were highlighted in my research as characteristics of articles with lower levels of Islamophobic representational patterns and higher levels of contestation of war propaganda such as the ‘War on Terror’ consensus. As Lynch et al. have observed, sometimes journalists are already adopting a ‘peace journalism’ approach to reporting – even if they don’t know it (2011: 13). Strategies which support and encourage such approaches to conflict reporting would be positive steps towards combating Islamophobic representations. A fruitful avenue for exploration here would be adoption of standards for conflict reporting, such as are set out by Jake Lynch in A Global Standard for Reporting Conflict (2013).

As was highlighted by the comparison between the differential strategies adopted by the two publications surveyed in this study to redressing complaints about problematic coverage of Muslims and Islam, programs which encourage reflexivity and ‘back to basics’ approaches for journalists may be more effective at reducing overall levels of Islamophobic reporting than artificial attempts to
construct ‘balance’. Given the continued agenda setting function of the mainstream press in mediatised political discourse, it is also imperative that strategies for reform move beyond the public broadcasters, alternative media, and the fringes of the mainstream media, and are targeted as well at the broadsheet press, as highly influential bastions of the ‘legacy’, mainstream media (Abdalla et al., 2010; Hackett, 2011). Reforms in these areas would have significant benefits in terms of increased contestation of hegemonic discourses which negatively impact upon the representation of Muslims and Islam, not just in Australian newspapers but across the global media landscape.

References


