

Australian Muslim Responses to the Discourse on Terrorism in the Australian Popular Media

The popular media is an important player in the contemporary focus on terrorism and counter-terrorism. The events surrounding the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 set the scene for the media's distinct role in the developing discourse on terrorism. The continuous coverage of the carnage resulting from the attacks and the subsequent analysis of the events dealt with both human and political dimensions of the new phenomenon in global politics. As a global media event, 11 September marked the beginning of an era of unprecedented media focus, both internationally and locally, on the issue of terrorism. The developing media discourse on terrorism has evolved into a discourse that inadvertently implicates debates on the status and role of Islam and Muslims around the globe. In Australia, the media discourse on terrorism has escalated into a voracious discourse that subsumes a range of issues involving Australian Muslims from the Cronulla riots in 2005 to controversial comments made by some Muslim religious figures. A tendency has emerged in this discourse to use religion as the primary marker of identity for Muslims with a simultaneous propensity to ignore the diversity among Australia's Muslim communities. The construction of Muslims as a homogenous unit enables the media to create narratives that both reflect and shape the cultural and political assumptions of the wider community vis-à-vis Australian Muslims. It also plays a central role in shaping the attitudes and perceptions of Australian Muslims towards the popular media and the broader Australian community, which reflect on their own sense of identity. The multi-directional nature of the relationship between the media, the broader society and the minority Muslim communities has been a growing area of interest for media and political analysts. For the most part, attention has focussed on the bias against Muslims in the popular media, establishing Australian Muslims as victims of negative media stereotypes. This paper deviates from this emerging trend and explores alternative responses to the discourse on terrorism among Australian Muslims.

Since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in September 2001, the emerging political and media discourse in Australia constructed the Muslim diaspora as a religious monolith, ignoring the ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences

between Australian Muslims. The underlying assumption in the media discourse on the so called 'War on Terror' is that Islam is backward, secular resistant and incompatible with the ideals and values of Western liberal democracy. Australian Muslims, by association are represented as an irreconcilable, 'out of place' other (Saniotis, 2004) effectively denying them entry and representation in the public sphere which Habermas (1989) argues is indispensable to democracy and to democratic participation. Based on research involving members of Muslim communities in Australia which examined the perceptions and attitudes of Muslims to the popular media discourse on terrorism, this paper argues that, in responding to this discourse, Australian Muslims are reconstructing their identity in ways which reinforce religion as the primary marker of identity. Such responses effectively corroborate the discursive construction in the popular media where religion is the sole characteristic by which Muslims are recognised. The argument is developed in two parts: the first part discusses the evolution of Australian media's construction of Muslims in the context of the discourse on terror. The second part examines how Australian Muslims perceive and respond to this discourse.

Australian Muslims and the Discourse on Terror

As early as 1912 the so called 'Moslem menace' was presented as cause for concern and a looming threat to Australia's cultural values. (1912). Supported by a history of anxiety over Australia's vulnerable borders and the hostile intentions of Asian neighbours, the construction of Muslims as an antagonistic 'other' found fertile soil in Australia's popular media. The discursive construction of Muslims and Islam in the Australian media has, for the most part, focused on Muslims as 'other', drawing on nationalist discourses and cultural understandings of nationhood and national identity (Saxton 2003; Turner 2003). Muslims are constructed as religious fanatics committed to annihilating liberal, secular governments and replacing them with anti-modernist regimes (Brasted 2001). Little consideration is given to the vast differences that exist among Muslims not only in terms of ethnicity and culture but also in terms of practice. In much of the literature on the representation of Muslims in the popular Australian media, whether in relation to asylum seekers, youth gangs and crime, Middle Eastern affairs or the 'war on terror', the point is

often made that Muslims have been characterized as non-members of the Australian community- relegating them to the space of the ‘other’, alien, foreign and incompatible with Australian cultural values.

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During the 1990s, the notion of Islam as a threat to Australian social and cultural values gained popularity inspired by local and global events. Australia’s involvement in the 1991 Gulf War kindled the popular media’s interest in Australian Muslims. Public expressions of opposition to Australia’s involvement in the war by some Australian Muslims prompted at least one commentator to state that Muslims who condemned Australia’s involvement should be repatriated to their countries of origin (Brasted 1997). The so called ‘Lebanese gang rapes’ in August 2000 were contextualized in the popular media as an ‘act of war’ against Anglo-Australia and a clear affront to masculine Australia. *Age* editor Pamela Bone’s comments embodied the vein in which the events were presented in the popular media: “Racially motivated rape, the intention of which is to defile the women of the enemy, is as old as warfare, but it is devastating to think this could be happening in Australia today” (Bone 2002). By the late 1990’s the dominant theme in popular print media articles on Muslims focused largely on critiquing the role of women in Islam, Islam and human rights, Sharia punishments and practices such as female genital mutilation and honour killings: all presented as evidence of Islam’s incompatibility with the values of liberal democracy.

The media focus on Islam and Muslims gained intensity following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon in September 2001. Media representation of the terrorist attacks drew on discourses of national identity and an ‘international kinship of whiteness’ to localise September 11 for Australian audiences (Osuri & Banerjee, 2004, p. 153). Osuri and Banerjee argue that, as shareholders in the Anglo Christian cultural world view, Australian audiences were also invited to participate in the distal responses to September 11- to renew their commitment to the values of democracy and freedom, terms solely and exclusively affiliated with the Western liberal tradition, and to view the terrorist attacks as an assault, not on the US, but on Western civilisation in general. Hence the ideoscapes of democracy and freedom were used to make distinctions between

the ‘culturally imagined “West” and a ‘culturally constructed Islam’ (p.158) and to legitimize references to civilized and uncivilized worlds.

The media representation of the September 11 tragedy consolidated the historically inherited representation of Islam as a backward, oppressive and uncivilised religion in stark contrast to the progressive and dynamic West. The discourse on terrorism and Islam in the Australian media has since evolved to subsume a range of discourses prompted by both local and international events involving Muslims or Arabs, while maintaining an underlying message that Islam is secular resistant and at odds with the principles of liberal democracy. The examination of media frames used in the coverage of terrorism by Hirst and Schutze attests to the fluid nature of the media discourse on terrorism (2004). The authors charted the representation of the ‘War on Terror’ in the *Australian* and found that since the terrorist attacks on the USA in 2001, the “national interest frame has been subsumed by the new terrorism frame in the mainstream media” (p. 172). The rapacious nature of the contemporary terrorism discourse can be observed in media and public debates around the Islamic practice of veiling, the Cronulla riots and the publication of the Danish cartoons depicting the Islamic Prophet, all of which have been presented as evidence of Islam’s inherent resistance to secular values.

The media discourse has been assisted by comments from some political leaders and public opinion leaders. In 2005, Liberal backbenchers Sophie Panopolous and Bronwyn Bishop called for a ban on the wearing of headscarves in public schools, drawing explicitly on the image of Islam as a violent, backward and oppressive ideology that has no place in Western liberal democracy. In Parliament, Panopolous asked, ‘Why should one section of the community be stuck in the Dark Ages of compliance cloaked under a veil of some distorted form of religious freedom?’ (Comments made by Sophie Panopoulos MP in Parliament on 5 September 2005. Available from <http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>). This rhetorical construction of the significance of the veil, widely reported in the media, is based on a belief that equality and freedom are values that are exclusive to the liberal democratic state. The role and status of women in

Islam, embodied in the veiled Muslim woman, are used to demonstrate the inability of Islam to coexist with the West where ‘women and men are equal’ (Bone 2002).

Alongside the recurrent debates in the media about the veil and its significance in Islam, the enduring correlation of Islam with violence and the threat of terrorism has gained salience since the September 11 attacks. In November 2005, the Australian Federal Police conducted dawn raids in which a number of suspected terrorists were detained, among them a Melbourne cleric. Media reporting on the arrests typically portrayed the suspects as the enemy. On November 9, 2005, the front page headline of *The West Australian* read “The Enemy Within” in reference to the Melbourne cleric. Its sub-heading collapsed the terms Muslim, illegal immigrant, terrorist and enemy, thus inferring that all Muslims in Australia were potentially illegal, potentially terrorists and potentially “the enemy within”:

Australia gave this *illegal Algerian migrant* a job and a safe place to bring up his six children. He showed his gratitude by telling us Osama Bin Laden was a great man, and now police say Abdul Benbrika leads a gang of *Muslims* who want to *blow up their countrymen to smithereens* (emphasis added).

In early 2006 the global reaction by some Muslims to the publication of a number of Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed yielded yet another opportunity for the Australian media to reinforce the stereotype of the ugly Muslim male. In an article in the Sydney Morning Herald on 9 February 2006, Miranda Devine described the violent reaction to the cartoons in some parts of the Muslim world as ‘a flexing of muscles by those men of the Islamic world who have long felt emasculated and insulted by the West’s economic superiority.’ Her article presents the reaction to the cartoons as evidence of attempts by Muslims to undermine the values of secular societies. To support this argument, Devine refers to the opinions of Daniel Pipes, a controversial analyst of world politics and director of the Middle East Forum. Quoting Pipes, Devine issues a warning about a ‘second prong of radical Islamic attack on the West: a relentless demand

for cultural change. This non-violent but incremental encroachment on Western secular society curtails freedoms and accords the Muslim minority special privileges' (Devine 2006).

Devine's reaction echoes those of some members of the Australian public to the call by Muslim leaders for newspapers to refrain from publishing the cartoons. On the Jihad Watch website a plea by Sheikh Fehmi El- Imam of the Victorian Board of Imams for Australian newspapers not to reprint the cartoons prompted hostile responses such as: 'Send this filth back to the hell hole from whence he came...The Australians must not allow him to contaminate their fine nation with his poison and his dirtiness. Islam must be contained like a contagious and deadly disease or an extremely toxic form of pollution' (2006).

The controversy over the cartoons, it may be argued, illuminates the inability of Muslims to articulate their concerns, views or opinions in a language acceptable to the polity: the 'common currency of debate' (Charney 1998). Instead of informing the wider community of the concerns and issues underlying the debate on pictorial depictions of the Prophet in language that appeals to the community at large as citizens, the general response from Australian Muslims was limited to claiming their right not to be offended.

At the same time however, attempts by Muslims to articulate their views and opinions in the popular media often draw opposition from the public about accommodating the needs of Muslims based on a perception that doing so threatens to erode Australia's cultural norms and the values of secularism. The apparent popularity of these perceptions in the broader community establishes an environment in which media reports on Muslims (including those that attempt to present positive stories) are interpreted in ways that often reinforce, rather than question, the dominant notions of Islamic 'orthodoxy'. An article in the *Herald Sun* on the banning of ham sandwiches at Hume Council lunches met with public backlash despite the fact that the decision was taken by the Council without consultation with the Muslim community in the area. The backlash to the story led Muslims in the area to publicly declare that they have no intention of changing Australian

practices in order to meet Islamic law and cultural practices (Akbarzadeh 2005, p. 32). The same kinds of reaction can be observed in what has become an annually recurring debate around the use of nativity scenes at Christmas where the Muslim minority is often implicated in what is perceived to be an attempt at influencing Australian cultural and religious traditions.

Several textual analyses of the popular media discourse confirm that in much of the media discourse both pre and post September 11, Muslims are clearly demarcated from “Australians” with the underlying assumption that ‘elements of Islam have an agenda hostile not only to Australia's values but also to the basic tenets of Western civilisation’ (Baume 2006). The media discourse directly situates Australian Muslims outside mainstream Australia. In this discourse the mainstream is defined in terms of the principles of freedom, democracy and equality and Islam is defined in terms of its opposition to these principles. Islam is associated with a global community of believers unable to make a commitment to a particular nation-state (Turam 2004). Muslims, therefore, are considered to be unable to commit to the values and principles of the liberal democratic state by virtue of their ‘Muslimness’. The Muslim diaspora is stripped of its ethnic, cultural or linguistic differences and constructed wholly and solely as a monolithic religious diaspora. The prevailing context is one in which Australian Muslims are not only denied their heterogeneity but are dealt with through an understanding of Islam that is rooted in the notion of a cultural and ideological clash between Islam and the West. Kymlicka (1997) argues that the secular principle of separation renders the secular state incapable of recognising religious identities and results in their ‘depoliticization’. The dominant media construction of Muslims as culturally and ideologically incompatible with secular Australia and the permeation of this notion in the broader social and political context have effectively resulted in the depoliticization of Australian Muslims denying them recognition in the public spaces of citizenship.

While there is a significant body of literature that examines the discursive construction of Muslims and Islam in the popular Australian media (Brasted 2001; Turner 2003; Saxton 2003; Poynting & Noble 2003; Manning 2004 & 2006), there have been no attempts to

explore Australian Muslim attitudes and responses to the media discourse. The research project on which this paper is based seeks to address this deficit. The data was collected as part of a research project that involved focus groups and individual in-depth interviews with Muslim Australians and members of the broader community. Ten focus groups and 60 individual interviews were conducted with 150 participants from various ethnic backgrounds, religious and age groups. Four of the focus groups were held exclusively with Australian Muslim participants in gender specific groups. Focus groups discussed issues relating to the media discourse on terrorism and public opinion on Australian Muslims including perceptions of the terrorist threat to Australia, the dominant messages in the media discourse on terrorism in relation to Muslims and Australians and how information and opinions about terrorism are circulated. An initial analysis of the focus groups highlighted several themes for further investigation through a series of in-depth individual interviews with equal numbers of Muslim respondents and respondents from the broader Australian community. The individual interviews used prompts to explore with respondents their constructions of media messages and the influence of the media on their opinions and perceptions. The findings reported here are based on the views expressed by Muslim participants in the focus groups and individual interviews in relation to their interpretations of the media discourse and their responses to this discourse. These findings are elaborated in the following sections.

Constructing the media discourse on terrorism

The influence of the mass media on the attitudes and emotions of individuals and groups of people has long been the focus of media theorists. The debate ranges from those who view the media as a propaganda tool with a powerful propensity for influencing the public attitudes and behaviours (Herman 1988) to the opposing view that the media's influence is limited (Slone 2000) and empowered audiences construct and interpret media messages in accordance with their own values and cultural world views. The information gathered in the focus groups and qualitative interviews suggests that Australian Muslims subscribe to a propaganda view of the media in terms of its influence on the opinions of the broader community but are often unaware of their own role as active agents in the

media communication process and the consequences of this. Respondents expressed a common belief that the media discourse strongly influenced public opinion against Muslims. At the same time however, respondents have actively developed a framework for understanding the media discourse that actually mirrors the underlying messages that situate Muslims as 'out of place'. Yet they were less likely to recognise their own role in deconstructing and internalising this message or the impact of this on their self-perceptions. This lack of awareness is neither unusual nor unexpected. Media theorists and researchers such as Webster (1998) assert that while individuals, as active agents, make conscious choices and uses of media in their everyday life, they may not always be fully aware of the consequences of their choices. In this sense they are at once active players in the media communication process but also vulnerable, albeit unconsciously, to media messages.

The most commonly expressed perception of the popular Australian media by research participants is that it both *implicitly* and *explicitly* identifies Australian Muslims as 'other' and effectively inculcates fear of Muslims among the broader community by equating Muslims with the threat of terrorism. This perception is embedded in a broader framework in which Australian Muslims who see themselves as part of a global community of believers identify with a notion that Muslims around the globe are under attack, and that they are the victims of a larger conspiracy aimed at undermining Islamic identity and eradicating Islam as a world religion. As one respondent commented:

They [the West] are aiming to destroy us and we are not aware of it but now we are under attack we are being destroyed. What about realising we are being attacked by purpose not by our people. And now there are terrorists- all these crimes that are happening under the name of the Muslims. Who are really behind them?

The media is seen as a complicit and crucial actor in this conspiracy to destroy Islam. It performs this role through the conflation of Islam with terrorism and the perpetuation of an underlying message that "terrorism is a Muslim tool" and "Australians need to be

afraid of Muslims”. Asked if the Australian media differentiated between Muslims and Australians, one interviewee offered the following comment which summarises the views of the majority of respondents:

The media says that if you are Australian it means that you enjoy freedom, you enjoy the rights of citizenship. That is the idea of what it means to be Australian, that you do those things. But if you are a Muslim, you are not Australian. You are a people who are dangerous, a people who are suspicious, a people who do not want democracy- all the characteristics that make up terrorists. So yes, there is a difference, a big difference. And it is a feeling all Muslims have, not just me, whether you are at school, at work, and especially if you wear the *hijab*.¹

A consistent theme in both the focus groups and individual interviews with Muslim participants is the intense distrust of the Australian popular media and a prevalent notion of the media as a political tool manipulated by government to instil fear and construct Australian Muslims as the object of terror. As one Muslim male participant observed: “the government loves to create a monster you know to feed and to frighten people- now we are the monster”. Central to the propaganda view of the media expounded by respondents is the efficacy that Muslims attribute to the popular media, with respondents articulating a belief that public opinion is strongly influenced by the media and highly susceptible to underlying media messages that situate Muslims outside of mainstream Australia. For example, participants directly apportioned blame for the attacks on Muslim women wearing the veil or *hijab* to biased media reports in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, expressing the belief that the media has a powerful propensity to incite hostility and influence public behaviour.

The prevailing view of the media as a powerful moderator of public opinion with a defiantly anti-Islamic agenda is underscored by an acute sensitivity among Australian Muslims of their own ‘otherness’. Muslim respondents framed their discussions about the

¹ Translated from Arabic by the researcher.

Australian popular media in terms of a diametrically opposed 'us' and 'them'; Muslim and non-Muslim. Here the Australian popular media occupies the space of 'them' by virtue of the perceived anti-Muslim sentiment it is seen to promulgate. This construction of the media as anti-Islamic, and hence anti 'us', became the dominant framework through which Muslim participants engaged with the popular media. Subsequently, media reports on events that involved Muslims, even to the slightest degree, were interpreted within this framework and deemed to be representative of the media's bias. In one focus group, young Muslim men attributed the public response to a much publicized boxing match between Anthony Mundine (a Muslim convert) and Danny Green in 2006 to the influence of the media discourse on terrorism, citing public disappointment over Mundine's victory as manifest of the media's bias against Muslims. It did not occur to the men in this group that support for Green in the Western Australian media may have been due to the fact that he hails from Western Australia and not to the religious beliefs of his opponent. Rather, they had subsumed the Mundine/ Green boxing match into their own construction of the media discourse on terrorism based on a perception that Mundine's religious beliefs were the singular, most critical factor influencing media coverage of the event. This example demonstrates how the construction of the media as defiantly anti-Muslim has become the lens through which Australian Muslims interpret the media discourse. It also demonstrates a lack of awareness of their own role in constructing this lens and its connection to their own sense of 'otherness'.

The impact of the media discourse on terrorism on participants' self-perceptions and understandings of their identity was evidenced in participants' expressed feelings of isolation and disenfranchisement. Expressing a perception that the inherent media message portrays 'Muslim' and 'Australian' as mutually exclusive modes of being, one respondent stated:

Even though we don't believe what they [the media] are saying it still has a big impact because you've grown up here all your life, you consider yourself an Australian and the media basically, is almost stabbing you in the back. I've never done anything wrong to this country and they portray you... and they always, not clearly, not

specifically state the fact that they'd almost be better off without us in a way; that Australia would be better off without the Muslims.

This statement reflects the dominant attitude of the participants in this study to the Australian popular media and attests to the nature of the relationship of Australian Muslims to the media as one characterised by intense distrust and opposition. This relationship both influences and is influenced by the construction of the media discourse as defiantly anti-Muslim. However, it is the tendency of Australian Muslims to ascribe to the media the hegemonic power to turn public opinion against them that has had the most profound impact on how they are responding to the media discourse.

Responding to the media discourse on terrorism

The perception of the media as a defiantly anti-Muslim purveyor of social attitudes has resulted in Australian Muslims responding in ways which impact on their identity constructions. Muslims who engage with negative media messages that are perceived as anti-Muslim are using the discourse to reconstruct a Muslim identity framed by a shared sense of injustice. They also engage alternative media discourses that substantiate victimhood to reinforce the victim identity. The victim identity is rooted in a notion that Australian Muslims are being victimised because of their religious beliefs. While it can be argued that there is much truth in this observation given the dominant messages in the popular media discourse, the fact remains that religion is the primary basis for constructing the victim identity. In this sense the victim identity corroborates the media discourse which recognises Australian Muslims wholly and solely as a religious entity and, importantly, as adherents of an ideology that is incompatible with the values of liberal secularism. On the other end of the spectrum are those Muslims who actively disengage with the media discourse, either out of necessity or choice. This type of response results in the creation of alternative narratives of belonging and the construction of alternative identities that are not framed by a shared sense of injustice but by a shared sense of citizenship.

Media and political discourses that affirm the notion of a conspiracy to undermine Islam or that present Muslims as victims, rather than aggressors, provide alternative discourses to the popular media and opportunities for Muslims to engage with alternative public spheres. Muslim participants who turned to alternative media discourses commonly referred to the Australian popular media as untrustworthy and described a desire to know 'the truth'. However, rather than disengage completely with the popular Australian media, these participants often continued to engage the media discourse either directly or indirectly for continual reaffirmation of their perceptions of anti-Muslim bias. At the same time they actively engaged alternative media sources. For the majority of Muslim participants, Arab media, the internet and conspiracy theories provided alternative discourses and afforded them opportunities to engage in alternative communicative spaces that did not perpetuate negative stereotypes of Muslims. Participants noted for example, that Arab networks such as Al Jazeera (based in Qatar) and Al Manar (based in Lebanon and run by Hizbollah.²) were more balanced in their reporting of events in the Middle East. Some participants however, expressed further suspicion of the Al Jazeera network based on a perception of Western media influence in their reporting:

But you look at Al Jazeera they talk in the same tongue as the Western media but in our language [Arabic]. And then you look again at something like al Manar who talks of their own tongue. They do not use the other media's ideas. They have been attacked by the Australians, been attacked by the Israelis and they have their own opinion.

Much like al Jazeera, Al Manar broadcasts images of Iraqi and Palestinian suffering and more recently graphic images of Lebanese casualties of Israeli air strikes. Unlike al-Jazeera these images are formatted into video clips accompanied by music and lyrics such as "we do not fear America". Despite political pressure including a decision by the US to list al-Manar as a terrorist organisation in December 2004, just one week after a French ban on the station because its programming had "a militant perspective with anti-Semitic connotations" (Jorisch 2003), al Manar continues to broadcast videos depicting the US as the "mother of terrorism". The particular brand of propaganda employed by al-

² Al Manar is no longer accessible to Australians through Arab satellite networks.

Manar is gaining popularity among some Muslims in Australia largely because it offers them opportunities to engage in an alternative communicative space in which Muslims are the victims.

By comparing the popular media messages such as those found in commercial television news reports with alternative media messages accessed through the internet or satellite TV, the participants were able to confirm their interpretations of the popular media discourse as anti-Muslim, thus supporting the perception of injustice and enabling the reconstruction of identity based on the notion of victimhood. The following comment by a male respondent reflects how the role attributed to the media creates and sustains a sense of victimisation among Muslims:

The media has directed the westerners that it is the Muslims, it is Al Qaeda who are behind it [terrorism] and unfortunately the people start looking at you like 'oh, you're the guilty one'. The law says you are innocent until proven guilty and it has changed that rule by saying you are guilty until proven innocent. So basically we were victimised and anything happens around the world now, any attack, anything, the fingers are pointed at us no matter what.

In focus groups, individuals who hinted that Muslims may in fact be involved in terrorist activities were immediately overruled by other members of the group. Participants in the individual interviews also alluded to networks of family and friends who exerted a strong influence on their constructions of the media discourse. Often seen as a source of news and information, these networks reiterated the notion that Western bias in the Australian media is inextricably linked to a global attempt to discredit Islam and is the core influence behind attacks of hostility and vilification against some Australian Muslims by some members of the broader community. In one focus group of Muslim men for example, a younger participant suggested that Muslims should not 'put all the blame on the media. We should put part of the blame I think on us as well because lots of people are fighting in the name of Islam'. He was quickly challenged by an older participant who insisted that Muslims were not to blame and that the media was influencing people

to believe that Muslims were responsible for terrorism. Each time the younger participant raised global events in which Muslims were implicated as the aggressors such as the genocide in Darfur, the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and attacks on the Kurdish people at the hands of Saddam Hussein, he was challenged by the older participant to provide evidence. The discussion ended with the older participant commenting that: “We can sit and do nothing and the media will still find doubt”.

Alongside this trend to engage with the media to substantiate the victim identity is an emerging trend among some Australian Muslims to reject the victim identity and construct alternative discourses of belonging that are not embedded in perceptions of injustice against a community of believers. Active *disengagement* with the popular Australian media emerged as a common response to the negative media discourse, particularly among the younger female participants in the study. By distancing themselves from the media discourse these Muslims were able to regain a sense of power that enabled them to re-construct their identity unencumbered by anxiety about the perceptions of the broader community.

Active disengagement does not necessarily entail redefining the individual’s relationship with the media. Indeed, the construction of the media as anti-Muslim was the most salient and consistent theme expressed by all Muslim participants including those who disengaged. Rather, disengagement was motivated by the individual’s awareness of this relationship and the impact of the media discourse on the individual’s sense of self. In several cases, participants who wear the hijab related periods of anxiety about venturing into public spaces for fear of being vilified or attacked. Often this anxiety was not based on personal experiences or relationships with individual members of the broader community, which were often described as positive, but on a perception of themselves as ‘other’ internalised through engagement with the media discourse and an assumption that the broader community was susceptible to media messages in this discourse. Once they took action to disengage with the media, often out of necessity, this anxiety dissipated.

In this respect, the power attributed to the media in terms of its influence on the opinions and attitudes of the broader community is the most critical factor influencing Australian Muslim responses to the media discourse. The relationship with the media remains one of opposition. Likewise, the construction of the media as anti-Muslim continues to be the framework through which media messages are interpreted. Disengagement then does not shift the perception of the media discourse but means that this discourse is no longer used as a basis for constructing identity or for developing a perception of the dominant public opinion. The individual is therefore afforded the opportunity to reconstruct their identity and re-evaluate their own perceptions of 'otherness'. One woman described this transition in the following terms:

I used to watch a lot of news...but then I just felt very negative about it, so when I would go out into University, I would be like "Oh, are people are looking at me just because I'm Muslim and stuff". But then when I stopped watching TV and everything... I guess I could identify more, like with the rest of society, when I didn't concentrate so much on myself being different.

Disengagement with the media discourse on terrorism can be described as a kind of strategic withdrawal; a form of media activism that empowers individuals to re-construct and re-define their identities as members of a broader community and not, as in the first type of response discussed above, on the basis of a shared perception of Muslims as victims. This type of response is prompted by the individual's awareness of his or her own vulnerability to the media discourse and an attempt to limit its impact on his or her sense of self. Unlike those respondents who continue to engage with the media in order to sustain a victim identity, those who disengage reflect an awareness of the relationship between the notion of Muslims as victims and their engagement with the media discourse. In disengaging with the media, they are also disengaging with the notion of victimhood and finding alternative narratives of belonging.

Conclusion

The Muslim diaspora in Australia appears to be at a crossroads. They are faced with a situation in which they are marginalised and marked as an 'out of place' other (Saniotis, 2004); where the underlying message in the media construction of Australian Muslims is that Australian and Muslim are mutually exclusive modes of being. Australian Muslims are responding to this media discourse by renegotiating their identity and creating alternative narratives of belonging. In some cases, these responses are linked to a sense of empowerment and participation in the state as equal citizens with the right to choose. By disengaging with the negative media discourse, some Muslims are finding that they are unencumbered by negative perceptions of public opinion and empowered to renegotiate their identity on the basis of shared or common values with the broader community. In other cases, Muslims are continuing to engage with the media discourse in order to reinforce their perceptions of victimhood. This response has enabled some Australian Muslims to renegotiate their identity within a framework of a shared perception of injustice, resulting in the formation of new narratives of belonging where the ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences among Muslims are blurred and where religion becomes the principal basis for the construction of identity. These kinds of responses effectively reinforce the media discourse in which religion is the primary identity marker for Australian Muslims and which is based on an understanding of Islam as a religion at odds with the values of liberal democracy. In moving forward, Australian Muslims will need to find a way out of the 'other'. They will need to challenge the perception of the Australian Muslim diaspora as a monolithic religious entity in order to secure representation in the public spaces of citizenship. The trend for some Muslims to disengage with the victim identity and re-engage with the broader community as equal citizens indicates that Australian Muslims may have found a way to negotiate their place as Australian citizens.

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