

Reporting Islam in Australian Newspapers: the case of the proposed Elermore Vale mosque

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Abstract

This paper uses the case study of a proposed mosque development in Newcastle as an example of how Islam has been reported in the Australian media. The media reports analysed were published in Newcastle's local newspaper *The Herald*. The discourses evident in the newspaper content reveal an undercurrent of racism within the reporting against the Muslim community, and, it may be argued, are representative of a larger trend of Islamophobia in the West. Illustrations of Edward Said's (1978, 2004) concept of Orientalism emerged through the reporting, where Islam, and by extension the Newcastle Muslim Association, was portrayed as being different, strange and threatening to the local community. The fact that this kind of anti-Muslim sentiment can be identified in local media products is indicative of the challenges for local media groups covering local media events, as it represents how a local matter can become contentious due to globally recognized concerns.

Keyword: Cultural Politics

Introduction

This paper forms part of a larger research project investigating the reporting of Islam in Australian newspapers through three case studies. This paper concentrates on the first case study, the proposed mosque development in the Newcastle suburb of Elernmore Vale. The media reports analysed were published in Newcastle's local newspaper *The Herald* between February 2010, when the Newcastle Muslim Association purchased the land for the proposed development, and March 2012, when the Land and Environment Court ruled against the proposal.

The research is underpinned by ideas of discourse, power, reception studies and orientalism. It was conducted as a longitudinal case study and is mainly qualitative in nature, using discourse analysis; however, some content analysis was also used to quantifiably represent power relations. The analysis conducted revealed discourses of power, religious affiliation, 'the Other', the community and the victim evident in the reports. The preliminary results of this research point to a necessary discussion surrounding the ethics of reporting on Islam for a Western audience, both in Australia and a wider international context.

Discourse analysis is crucial to this research as both a method and a conceptual framework. Paltridge (2006: 1) defines discourse analysis as 'an approach to the analysis of language that looks at patterns of language across texts as well as the social and cultural contexts in which the texts occur'. This approach allows the investigation into what types of knowledge are being presented to an audience, and who is constructing and presenting these discourses, raising issues of power. Michel Foucault wrote extensively on discourse and power, 'maintain[ing] that representations of knowledge are developed through types of discourse – discussions that are framed by the current accepted norms of institutions that are in positions of power within the intellectual establishment' (Walliman, 2010: 24). The media are currently the institutions hosting these discussions and infusing media messages with discourses which define media representations. The media are also, therefore, responsible for

power relationships developed in terms of inclusion and exclusion, and what Stahl locates as Foucault's interest in 'the criteria according to which specific views are considered legitimate contributions' (Stahl, 2004: 4330), or in other words, 'how it is that one particular statement appeared rather than another?' (Foucault, 1972: 27). This concept of selection of contributions was key in the research, in order to identify whose voice was being presented to the community by *The Herald* in an attempt to discern power relationships and potential coverage bias (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000) from journalistic choices. Five distinct discourses were identified for analysis, those being power, religious affiliation, 'the Other', community, and the victim. These discourses reveal a clear undercurrent of racism within the local reporting against the Muslim community, and, it may be argued, are representative of a larger trend of Islamophobia in the West.

The key theorist currently writing on representations of Islam in Western media, as referenced for this paper, is Anne Aly (2007, 2010). Aly's 2007 article, titled *Australian Muslim Responses to the Discourse on Terrorism in the Australian Popular Media*, stated that:

[I]n the Australian context this discourse has emerged as one which implicates Australian Muslims, constructing them as a homogenous monolith with an underlying implication that Islam, and by association Australian Muslims, is secular resistant and at odds with the values of the liberal democratic state (Aly, 2007: 27).

Aly found that Australian Muslims were not given a voice amongst the dominant discourse of terrorism in Australian media, and this marginalised them into the position of 'the Other'. These findings are supported by Rane and Hersi (2012: 138) who found that 'post 9/11, the media frames used in the coverage of Islam and Muslims have been based on Orientalist depictions of a religion and people as a different, strange, inferior and threatening "other"'.

Orientalism was the theory of Edward Said, who argued that it is the representations of Islam in the media which create issues in society, rather than the many practices of Islamic faith and culture

themselves. This is partially due to the power imbalance in media representations of authoritative sources, whereby Muslim people 'cannot represent themselves, they must ... be represented by others' (Said, 1985: 7). Said argues that Western reporters intentionally include ideas of terrorism and fear in their reporting on Islam to reinforce the dominant discourses in society surrounding this religious group (Aly, 2007; Aly, 2010; Dunn, 2001; Rane and Hersi, 2012). This research found that *The Herald* is continuing to reinforce these dominant discourses of 'the Other' in their reporting.

Local media organisations such as *The Herald* play an important role in local communities in terms of information development and the maintenance of power relations. Hindman (1996: 708) argues that 'local newspapers are integral components of the community that tend to reflect both the agenda and the tactics of the local power structure'. Local newspapers therefore work to preserve power relations in society and maintain cohesion. The importance of *The Herald* specifically is represented on the newspaper's website, where it is stated that *The Herald* is 'the largest local media organisation' in the Newcastle region (Fairfax Media, 2012) and 'the only Newcastle-based newspaper serving the entire Hunter and Central Coast regions, six days a week' (ibid). Being both the largest and the only locally based newspaper, *The Herald* therefore holds an important position in the Newcastle community, and is well trusted by the local readership, highlighting the importance of ethical practice.

The Elmore Vale mosque was proposed to be built by the Newcastle Muslim Association after the Muslim population of Newcastle outgrew the existing Wallsend mosque. The Association purchased the land for the proposed development in February 2010, and was immediately met with opposition by the wider community, and specifically by the Elmore Vale Community for Appropriate Residential and Environmental Strategies (EVCARES) group. The plans for the mosque were sent to the Joint Regional Planning Panel and were rejected in August 2011. The Association appealed with

the NSW Land and Environment Court, and was ruled against in March 2012, bringing the issue to a close.

Methodology

The research was conducted as a longitudinal, qualitative case study of newspaper articles published by Newcastle publication *The Herald* on the proposed development on the Elmore Vale mosque between February 2010 and March 2012. In total, 58 articles were examined in the timeframe, which were a combination of 47 news articles and 11 editorial/opinion pieces. The news items were chosen through theoretical sampling wherein 'the idea is to select materials for conceptual or theoretically relevant reasons' (Altheide, 1996: 33-34), which allowed the issue to be covered comprehensively. Case study methods have been criticised for being ungeneralisable, and whilst it is true that they are not generalisable statistically, Yin (2009: 15) argues that 'case studies, like experiments, are generalisable to theoretical propositions'. For example, if the same theoretical concepts are found to hold up in numerous case studies then it is likely that those theories are accurate. In this way, a successful case study may provide a basis for other case studies to expand upon.

As stated previously, the general findings of this case study indicate that there are underlying connotations of racism within the reporting, against the Muslim community. Close inspection of the newspaper content yields qualitative data centering on discourses of power, religious affiliation, the 'other', community and the victim. Given the complex interrelationships between these discursive categories, no distinctive sequencing of the analytical discussion has been intended on the part of the researcher. Rather, the thematic analyses which follow demonstrate in detail how predominant discourses of 'Otherness' (Kothari, 2013) prevail by being inextricably embedded in *The Herald's* content in various ways.

Discourse of Power

The power of individuals to represent events and ideas on behalf of their communities is partially represented in the articles through selective use of source identification and titles. The choice by *The Herald* to identify three residents by name in an article from 9 December 2010 highlights the residents' significance as sources in terms of the proposed development. By identifying residents specifically *The Herald* gives them authority and lends authenticity to their cause. Authenticity is defined here as 'implicitly a polemical concept, fulfilling its nature by dealing aggressively with received and habitual opinion' (Trilling, 1972: 94). Authenticity therefore involves value judgements regarding how we distinguish people in society. By identifying residents by name and singling them out *The Herald* increases authenticity by giving the reader a specific person they can isolate as holding these opinions, rather than vague ideals held by an unnamed collective.

The choice to not identify individuals by name was used to deduct power from the EV CARES group, when their president Geoff Byrnes was referred to as 'local business man Geoff Byrnes' (Smee, 23 February 2011: 7). This incorrect identification of the source is at odds with basic journalistic practice and code of ethics, whereby all sources must be attributed unless they negotiate confidentiality. This can also be related to pragmatics, which 'is interested in what people mean by what they say, rather than what words in their most literal sense might mean by themselves' (Paltridge, 2006: 3). In this instance, then, the exclusion of Byrnes' official title could arguably undermine his authority with the readership and does not reveal his alliance with the EV CARES group, potentially undermining the power of the EV CARES voice in these articles. Alternatively, however, *The Herald* later used identification and titles to increase the perceived authority of EV CARES vice-president Steve Beveridge, referring to him as 'EV CARES vice-president and semi-retired academic Steve Beveridge' (Gregory, 14 May 2011: 5). The reference to Beveridge's status as a semi-retired academic could build his authority, and make him seem a more credible source, giving him increased power in the eyes of the reader. His identification being linked directly to the EV CARES group then passes this

perceived power on to them.

The way *The Herald* reporters used figures in their articles also develops the power relationship between the two key parties. In one article, it is written 'Connell said he had received many calls in support of the development based on the concept of "freedom of religion"' (Thompson, 11 December 2010: 5) and then stated 'there are believed to be between 900 and 1000 objections to the development' (ibid). By stating the number of people opposing the mosque development *The Herald* quantifies the opposition, whereas the statement of the 'many calls' of support is very vague. The audience could interpret many calls as 10 or 100, dependent on numerous factors, whereas the use of '900 and 1000 objections' is more concrete and powerful to the reader.

The content analysis conducted over the whole period (2010 – 2012) revealed that the Newcastle Muslim Association received more media attention than the EV CARES community group. Whilst the Newcastle Muslim Association was quoted only 17 times compared to the community group's 20, it was mentioned in the articles 106 times compared to EV CARES being mentioned only 44 times. This shows more than double the representation for the Association, and represents increased opportunities for their pro-mosque message to be heard. By analysing this data in relation to 'coverage bias', which involves 'measuring the physical amount of coverage each side of some issue receives' (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000: 136) it can be seen that balanced reporting was not achieved. D'Alessio and Allen argue that 'it is reasonable to assume that half the coverage should be accorded to one side and half to the other, and that deviations from this pattern are consistent with a coverage bias of some kind' (ibid), and in this case balance clearly did not occur.

However, this trend was reversed within the articles which quoted residents, with the wider community members quoted 14 times, whilst only one quote was included from someone identified as a Muslim. Additionally, opponents of the mosque were mentioned 20 times and supporters

seven, showing almost triple representation in favour of the mosque opponents. Therefore, when it came to representing the community's point of view, *The Herald* was again unbalanced, but this time favouring the wider community and denying the Muslim community 'the "right to reply"' (Hafez, 2002: 226). Thus the Newcastle Muslim Association, the EV CARES community group, the wider community and the Muslim community were given mixed opportunities to portray their arguments through *The Herald's* selective use of sources in the reporting.

Power is also portrayed through the images accompanying the articles, in particular two articles regarding protests in December 2010. The first image shows three anti-Muslim protestors with seven anti-racism protestors behind them. The anti-racism protestors outnumber the anti-Muslim protestors more than two to one, visually representing the power imbalance. This power relation could be interpreted as an extrapolation of the divisions in the wider community, showing that the anti-racism protestors may actually represent a larger proportion of the community than the anti-Muslim protestors, and therefore of the power. The second image is from 9 December 2010 and shows many people at a residents' meeting standing with arms folded and unsmiling. The group image expresses power in numbers and visually communicates the formidable opposition to the mosque. This idea was reinforced within the article, with the 'agitated residents' (Davidson, 9 December 2010: 2) described as being 'out in force' (*ibid*).

Overall from 2010 – 2012 there were six pictures printed portraying members of the EV CARES group, and 11 of the Newcastle Muslim Association. It must be noted that this majority was reached in 2012 when there was a change in focus of the articles, to be discussed later. The trend was reversed again in the images of the wider community, with four images of opponents compared to just one image of supporters, showing almost equal coverage overall of both sides visually, and the achievement of coverage balance.

Discourse of Religious Affiliation

A discourse of religious affiliation emerges through the articles, partially due to the use of the term 'Muslim' as an identifier. The content analysis found that the word 'Muslim' was used 66 times across all articles (2010 – 2012), compared to 'Islam' being used just 30 times, showing double the usage and the level of importance placed on religion as an identifier by *The Herald*. In this way, protests against the mosque development were often referred to as 'anti-Muslim' instead of 'anti-mosque'. It can therefore be argued that the reporting aligned the opposition to be against the people who would use the mosque, rather than being against the mosque itself. At times, the use of religion as an identifier was done seemingly irrelevantly, such as when a resident commenting on the proposed development was identified by *The Herald* as 'Rah's fellow Muslim Bikash Paul' (Thompson, 11 December 2010: 4). The UK's Press Complaints Commission's code of practice states the media 'should not provide details of an individual's race, colour or religion unless genuinely relevant to the story' (Keeble, 2009: 174). When other residents were quoted in the articles they were not referenced as Christians, but simply as residents, so it seems unnecessary and exaggerated on the part of the journalist to identify this man according to his religion.

The frequent referencing to religion as an identifier reveals an undercurrent of racism in the articles, through the clear distinctions made throughout the reporting between what are viewed to be 'legitimate concerns' (Connell, in Thompson, 11 December 2010: 5) and objections which are 'undeniably ... born of prejudice' (Corbett, 16 September 2010: 8). Various positions became apparent in the reporting which represented a shift from concerns of the mosque causing traffic congestion to the possible growth of a concentrated Muslim population in the suburb as problematic. *The Herald* frequently reported the idea that traffic concerns were being used as a cover for religious prejudice. As one editorial article suggested, 'traffic seems to be the dominant concern ... traffic is ubiquitous and a convenient hook for objections ... traffic is a mask for the real concern' (ibid). Traffic congestion is therefore reported by *The Herald* to be a strategic device to

oppose the mosque whilst avoiding the religious elements that people may find unseemly. This view is again represented through a headline from 2011, which read *Flash Point: Why are people really worried about the mosque* (Gregory, 14 May 2011: 1). The word 'really' in this context suggests an ulterior motive to the opposition. A clear religious intolerance can be seen through reported statements from a Joint Regional Planning Panel meeting, which described how 'a woman who took her place in the gallery told reporters before the meeting she hoped they would "make sure those hanky heads don't get that temple"' (Connell, 23 August 2011: 2). It could be argued that *The Herald* attempted to bring this undercurrent of racism to the surface by reporting on it so frequently, and making people aware of it. This is supported by other articles which present a more pro-Muslim point of view, particularly during the coverage of the Australian Protectionist Party's attempted anti-Muslim protest which was reported as a 'non-event' (Davidson, 4 December 2010: 7), with just four people participating. This would suggest good ethical practice by *The Herald* in its attempts to achieve balanced and fair reporting on minority groups.

Discourse of 'the Other'

The discourse of 'the Other' is primarily developed in the articles through consistent references to Muslims as being extremists or terrorists. Edward Said argues that in modern society it is impossible to use words such as 'Islam' or 'Muslim' without invoking negative connotations in the audience's mind. This is evidenced by numerous articles, one of which used phrases such as 'unimaginable brutality', (Corbett, 16 September 2010: 8), 'slaughter', 'evil', and the 'horror of the World Trade Centre slaughter is burnt into Western consciousness' (*ibid*). The Bali bombings were also referenced in this article by stating 'bombs exploded among holidaying Lower Hunter people, and it seemed that everyone knew one or more of the victims' (*ibid*). This reference to bombings which killed many Australians, and particularly Newcastle residents, locates the incident closer to home and gives the issue more impact for local readers.

Raising these examples and drawing on these connections to global events encourages the readers to call on their mental models, those being 'subjective representations of specific episodes' (Van Dijk, 2009: 6). Mental models come from personal experiences but are influenced by communication and socialisation; 'hence, models constitute the unique interface that combines the personal and the unique, on the one hand, with the social and the shared, on the other' (*ibid*). Therefore, by referencing instances where extremist Islam has impacted the consciousness of readers, the audience is encouraged to call on these mental models and recall how they felt when these events occurred, making links between what happened then and the current mosque development. As Dunn (2001: 305) has argued, 'Islamophobia may circulate globally but it impacts locally as opposition to Islamic places of worship'. This supports Said's belief that journalists intentionally include discourses of terrorism and fear in their reporting on Islam, linking the ideas in the audience's minds.

This purposefulness was obvious in a 2011 article concerning a public meeting that was supposed to be about general community issues being overtaken by discussions about the mosque. The wording used by *The Herald* reporter was 'the meeting was "hijacked" by residents' concerns about a proposed mosque development' (Smee, 16 February 2011: 11). The word 'hijacked' will draw specific connotations for the readers and normally this would be avoided; however, the word was placed in inverted commas suggesting the author had used the word on purpose, perhaps to make a pun. This deliberately draws on the idea of Muslims as terrorists, bringing the ideas to the fore of the reader's mind, as shown in mental models, and is representative of poor journalistic choices.

Also referenced in an editorial article by Corbett were comments previously made by Sheik Taj el-Din Hilaly regarding Western women and other cultural issues. The author of this article states that there is 'no doubt in my mind that the brand of Islam [Hilaly] represented was a savage, primitive religion that had no place in Australia ... there is no indication that the leaders of the Newcastle Muslim Association share Hilaly's interpretation of Islam' (Corbett, 16 September 2010: 8). In his

phrasing, the author is careful to distinguish between different manifestations of Islam, and acknowledges that not all Muslim people are extremists. Another example of this distinction is in a 2012 article, where the Muslim people involved in the war on terror are titled 'militant Islam' (*The Herald*, 5 January 2012: 10). This word choice shows a distinction, and encourages the wider community and readership to make a distinction between the militant, fundamental Islam and the moderate, religious Islam represented by the Newcastle Muslim Association. These word choices indicate an effort by the journalist to accurately represent different elements of Islam, showing responsible reporting on their behalf.

Attempts were made by Newcastle Muslim Association spokeswoman Diana Rah to mitigate the 'Otherness' of the Muslim community, in an opinion piece published by *The Herald* titled *Mosque Neighbours Can Look to Peace* (Rah, 10 September 2010: 9). In the article, Rah lists a number of ways in which the Muslim community contributes to the wider community, stating that 'a large number [of Muslims] are professionals such as engineers, doctors, academics and educationalists, managers, tradespeople and mariners among others' (*ibid*). Through this list Rah aims to show that the Muslim community is important and already integrated into the wider community. Some pro-Muslim attitudes were then put forward by *The Herald*, with one article arguing 'anti-Muslim sentiment is a sometimes pervasive force in global politics, but it has no place in deciding the merits of a development application in suburban Croudace Road' (*The Herald*, 4 December 2010: 19). Altering the perception of Muslims as 'the Other' is shown to be important, as 'discussion of the fate of the Elermore Vale mosque is not going to be confined to Newcastle, but will feed into perceptions of Muslims in Australia' (McGregor, 21 November 2011: 11). The implications drawn from this case study could potentially alter the way that the discourse of 'the Other' develops nationally and even internationally across future news articles, so it is important that the journalists recognise the potential impact of their reporting, and act accordingly. The increasing pro-Muslim attitudes

beginning to be represented in the articles are therefore important in striving towards fair and balanced coverage of the issue.

Discourse of Community

A discourse of community as a location or cultural geography emerged out of attempts to paint Elmore Vale as a 'suburban centre' (Connell, 23 February 2010: 5) and 'village' (Byrne, 4 December 2010: 20). *The Herald* described the locality of both the existing Wallsend and proposed Elmore Vale mosques with phrases such as 'why should our quiet way of life and village be subjected to this' (*ibid*) and 'for more than 20 years the mosque has been settled into Wallsend suburbia' (Thompson, 11 December 2010: 4). The choices of reporters and opinion piece authors to use terms that denote the suburb as basic and protected represent an attempt to portray Elmore Vale as an innocent suburb, untouched by issues of religious contention. This idea of innocence is contrasted to the mosque development, as EV CARES president Geoff Byrnes argues, 'let us not be deluded – this is a large scale regional development set right in the middle of Elmore Vale' (Byrne, 4 December 2010: 20). The comparison of the 'large scale' regional development with the 'village' of Elmore Vale attempts to portray the two as being incompatible.

The discourse of community also develops with a sub-community consisting of the EV CARES community group. EV CARES is an acronym for Elmore Vale Community for Appropriate Residential and Environmental Strategies, and Byrnes writes that the group was 'formed to develop strategies consistent with the scale and character of the area' (*ibid*). *The Herald* picks up the usage of the word 'appropriate' in the groups' name, and this becomes a buzzword in the articles, with reference to the mosque as being inappropriate for the local area. EV CARES vice-president Steve Beveridge 'said the group objected to the mosque because of its inappropriate location, scale and social impact' (Gregory, 14 May 2011: 5) and 'community group EV CARES president Geoff Byrne

said the development was a major regional amenity and unsuitable for Elermore Vale' (Smee, 23 April 2011: 15). This argument allowed the EV CARES group to oppose the mosque based on arguments separate to religious and racial issues, and *The Herald* largely reported it as such.

Discourse of the Victim

The discourse of the victim emerged in the 2012 articles following the rejection of the mosque development by the Joint Regional Planning Panel, and after the violent attacks on the existing Wallsend mosque. *The Herald* reported that these attacks, which saw two men throw objects and kick the door of the mosque while people were inside, had 'left the city's Muslim community feeling "vulnerable and scared"' (Speight, 5 January 2012: 1). Links were made by many in the community, including *The Herald*, between the attacks' timing and the proposed development: 'Ms Rah said ... since the association had made plans to establish its mosque at Elermore Vale, the incidents had increased and were "starting to become a pattern"' (Speight, 5 January 2012: 4). These attacks were reported as being extremely violent, with the phrase 'mosque attack' being used in the headline of three articles published on the 5th, 6th and 7th of January 2012. Following these attacks and the official decision to oppose the mosque development, *The Herald* began to portray the Muslim community as the victims in the situation. This represents a significant identity shift from previous articles where Muslims were portrayed to be a dangerous and menacing 'Other', as previously discussed. It could be argued that this change in coverage occurred because once the danger of the Newcastle Muslim Association being able to build the mosque was mitigated, they were viewed as less of a threat to the community, and reporting could therefore side more in favour of the association. Another possible argument is that journalists at *The Herald* realised they had gone too far in their portrayal of the Muslim community as dangerous and menacing, and therefore changed their reporting due to a moral conscience.

Conclusion

Discursive analysis of *The Herald's* reports demonstrates that discourses of power, religion, 'the Other', community, and 'the victim' are prevalently portrayed, as shown in the analysis of the 58 articles which were chosen through theoretical sampling (Dancygier, Sanders and Vandelanotte, 2012; Jensen, 2011). Furthermore, these portrayals contribute to anti-Muslim attitudes communicated by key parties in the articles, who use the Islamic religion as an identifier, the marginalisation of the Muslim community as 'Other', and an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy to manifest perhaps more nationally held concerns at a local level. The fact that this kind of anti-Muslim sentiment can be identified in local media products is indicative of the challenges for local media groups covering local media events, as it represents how a local matter can become contentious due to globally recognised concerns. In this instance, those concerns are the perceived threat of Muslims and Islam to the West which arguably results from a failure, on behalf of both the journalist and the community, to understand Islam. Further research into this case study will involve interviews with journalists and editors in order to give a deeper account of their representative practices. Two additional case studies will also be conducted across Sydney and Melbourne to compare data and test these results.

Journalists can attempt to combat the concerns raised in this paper through education for themselves which they can use to inform the public, as well as being more mindful of their word usage and the powerful effect this can have in respect to the readership's mental models. Journalists should also attempt to expand their source base, seeking out minorities, including Muslims, to comment on stories in which they are principally involved, helping to combat any suggestions of coverage bias. Although the reports analysed were from a local newspaper, the reporting is both

influenced by and has the potential to influence future reporting on Islam in a national and international context, highlighting the need for ethical practice when reporting in these cases.

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