

Mainstream media exposed: Islamophobic bias in the Murdoch press

Zia Ahmad, *Australasian Muslim Times*, 1 March 2018



OnePath Network has carried out a groundbreaking analysis of coverage of Islam in the Media by tracking 5 of Australia's biggest newspapers reporting on Islam during the year 2017.

They focused on 5 newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch's company News Ltd, namely The Australian, The Daily Telegraph, The Herald Sun, The Courier Mail and The Advertiser.

The results have been shocking, evidence of inherent Islamophobic bias in the Murdoch press pushing for a malicious agenda for the consumption of the mainstream Australian population by way of vilification of Islam and demonisation of Muslims.

OnePath Network is Australia's largest Islamic original content video production studio and media outlet with a global reach. Based in Sydney, it was established in February 2014 as a not-for-profit organisation in order to give the Australian Muslim community a voice.

The study by OnePath concluded that in the popular Australian media, 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. The way the media talks about Islam in Australia is disproportionate, divisive and dangerous.

There were more than 8 articles a day in the Murdoch press slamming Muslims with 152 front pages over the year that featured Islam in some negative capacity. A lot of the time, these articles and exclusives were the featured item, the most important story for selling the newspaper.

In one year these 5 newspapers published almost 3000 articles that referred to Islam or Muslims alongside words like violence, extremism, terrorism or radical.

Whilst a general overview clearly shows just how disproportionate the negative coverage of Islam is, it's only when you zoom in and see the actual issues that the obsessive and unnecessary nature of the coverage becomes clear.

And it wasn't just about terrorism. Many of the most absurd and overblown examples of coverage come from issues that the Murdoch press highlighted by themselves, dragging the rest of Australia into their worldview.

The analysis of columns by six of the most controversial commentators in the Australian news media, including figures like Andrew Bolt, Miranda Devine and Janet Albrechtsen showed that on average, 31% of their opinion pieces were devoted to Islam, with the overwhelming majority of them being negative and divisive in nature.

Even though they are stated to be "opinion pieces", they are often written as fact and encouraging and promoting ideals that could be threatening to a minority community.

In the light of the findings from the analysis, OnePath concluded that:

Media coverage of Islam does not exist in a vacuum of facts and objectivity. The reality is, print news is a struggling industry, and a very effective method for selling newspapers is fear, sensation and drama. The more that these methods are normalised, the more they will be used against anybody who the media paints as the next 'enemy' of 'Australian values'.

It is simply naive to think that journalists don't have a choice in what they choose to talk about, and that those choices don't have consequences on the public's perception. This is not just an issue of bias or exaggeration in individual reports.

As we found in our research, the overwhelming scale of association between Islam and terror, extremism, violence, and oppression through phrasing and word choice is far more significant than any isolated events or reports.

If 2891 articles include the phrase "Islamic terrorism" or "Muslim oppression", those ideas stick. This is coupled with stereotypical pictures and images on front pages and feature stories that are prominently shown in order to sell more papers. These images have been shown to significantly shape the way Islam and Muslims are framed in the public eye (Ewart 2017).

In fact there have been a high number of incidents in which images have had to be withdrawn and apologies made for incorrect associations with events. Many newspapers seem to have a policy of "show the face, apologise later." This kind of approach not only affects public perceptions, it has serious ramifications on the individuals that these papers choose to 'name and shame', whether correctly or not.

However, what is said and shown is only one aspect of the equation. As Thomas Huckin points out, 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. This can clearly be seen in the case of Yassmin Abdel-Magied's infamous Q&A appearance and ANZAC day post, or in the debates surrounding Halal food.

In other words, whether Muslims stay silent and take the heat, or 'play the game' and push back, the result is the same: public animosity and resentment of Islam in Australia.

Even to someone who has spent years working with Muslim communities to defend against anti-Muslim hate, the findings of this new study are astounding.

That approximately 70% of Australians have little to no knowledge of Islam and Muslims, yet are concerned about the rise of Islamic extremism locally, demonstrates how disturbingly influential tabloid journalism is in Australia.

It's time Australians acknowledge these publications for what they really are, tabloid journalism aimed at preying on irrational fears of the unknown and sensationalising isolated incidents to increase profits. These practices show a complete lack of social and professional responsibility and create real safety risks for the vast majority of Australian Muslims who want nothing more than to build a peaceful life for themselves and their families.

We know the difference between a trustworthy story and an untrustworthy story, the financial and political incentive for fake news drastically decreases.

When we hold the media to a higher standard, they will have no choice but to meet it.