

Knowing One Another: An Antidote for Mass Media Islam

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*The Impact of Media Representations on the
Understanding of Islam and Attitudes toward Muslims in
Queensland*

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Abstract:

Muslims comprise only a small proportion of the Australian population. Thus, rather than knowing Islam and Muslims through direct interaction, for the majority of Australians the mass media is their primary source of information about this faith and its adherents. This paper uses the term 'mass media Islam' to describe the version of Islam that is constructed by the media. It argues that this version is often a distortion of reality and perpetuates misunderstandings, stereotypes, and negative relations between Muslims and the wider society. Presented in this paper are the findings of analysis on the representation of Islam and Muslims in the Australian press as well as the findings of research on the impact of this content on the public's knowledge of Islam and attitudes towards Muslims. The paper argues that interaction between Muslims and the wider Australian society is the most effective means of offsetting the impact of mass media Islam and that it results in positive perceptions of Islam and Muslims and more harmonious social relations.

Background

Relations between Muslims and the wider society have been strained over the past decades and particularly since 2001. Media coverage of domestic issues and international events involving Muslims is considered to be the central factor in the perpetuation of negative perceptions of Islam. In the absence of direct or first-hand experience of people, places, or events, the mass media generally becomes the primary source of information.¹ The 2006 census, compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, shows Muslims comprising 1.7 percent of the Australian population. The wider Australian society has, therefore, a relatively limited opportunity for interpersonal interaction with Muslim people.

Since the Gulf War of 1991, and even as far back as the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Islam and Muslim people have attracted considerable media attention.² Research, specifically content analysis, has continued to demonstrate that Islam and Muslims have overwhelmingly been portrayed pejoratively by the mass media.³ Since 11 September 2001 further research has continued to show not only a massive increase in the volume of media coverage of Islam and Muslims but also an increase in the pejorative nature of this coverage.⁴

This paper does not suggest that violence, terrorism, discrimination against women, and violations of human rights committed by Muslims in the name of Islam are an invention of the mass media. Undeniably, these are a reality in certain parts of the Muslim world and among certain Muslim people. However, to consider the Western media's representation of Islam and Muslims as a mirror or a reflection of reality is inaccurate unless one recognises that, depending on their shape, mirrors are able to distort reality. Perhaps a better metaphor is to consider the media as a window; it does not so much distort reality as it limits the scope and range of view depending on the size, location, and direction of the window.

The general tendency of the mass media is to focus on the unusual, sensational, and extreme. Consequently, when people rely on the mass media for their understanding of Islam and Muslims, they are unlikely to gain a view of the full picture. Their understanding of Islam will be dominated by the statements and actions of a minority of Muslims in the context of specific people, places, and events, which could best be described as 'mass media Islam' for it is more consistent with the media construction of Islam than the reality. The late Edward Said puts it best in his book *Covering Islam* when he says:

The term "Islam" as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam. In no real significant way is there a direct correspondence between the "Islam" in common Western usage and the enormously varied life

¹ Bryant J. & Zillman, D. (Eds.) (2002). *Media Effects: Advances in theory and research*. Elbaum Associates: New Jersey.

² Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (Vintage: London, 1997).

³ Halim Rane, "Australian Press Coverage of Islam" (Master's Thesis, Bond University, 2000).

⁴ Peter Manning, *Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism* (Australian Centre for Independent Journalism: Broadway, 2004).

that goes on within the world of Islam, with its more than 800,000,000 [now 1.3 billion] people, its millions of square miles of territory principally in Africa and Asia, its dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies, cultures. On the other hand, "Islam" is peculiarly traumatic news today in the West....During the past few years, especially since events in Iran caught European and American attention so strongly, the media have therefore covered Islam: they have portrayed it, characterized it, analysed it, given instant courses on it, and consequently they have made it "known".⁵

Media content

In the study of Islam and Muslims in the West and the issue of inter-community relations, a major focus has been the representation of Muslims in the mass media. This body of literature essentially consists of content analyses of the media coverage of Islam and Muslims. A considerable body of literature concerning the representation of Muslims in the United Kingdom and United States has been produced, which provides some relevant insights for this paper.

Elizabeth Poole's book, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*, presents the findings of her analysis of the content of two British newspapers over a two-year period (1994-1996). She found that while the coverage of British Muslims was more detailed than that with an overseas focus, an 'orientalist' discourse was present in the reporting.⁶ Focussing on the American context, Fawaz Gerges, in his article, *Islam and Muslims in the Minds of America*, argues that the negative media representation of Islam and Muslims, coupled with the influence of certain lobby groups and foreign-policy elites, exert significant influence on the US public, which in turn fosters the hardline US foreign policy toward political Islam.⁷

While most content analyses of the representation of Islam and Muslims in the mass media tend to focus on 'factual' media, predominantly newspapers, and television news to a lesser extent, 'fictional' media is equally important in the context of this research, particularly given resonating effect that occurs among audiences when related issues are presented in both fictional and factual media. This point is affirmed by the work of Jack Shaheen, whose article, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, demonstrates that Hollywood films portraying Arabs and Muslims frequently allude to or are based upon actual events or issues, giving fictional films a factual or authoritative character. In his analysis of over 900 films portraying Arabs and Muslims, Shaheen found them to repeatedly dehumanise Arabs and Muslims, and portray them as heartless, brutal, uncivilised, religious fanatics, who are violent, and terrorists. He argues that the repetitious nature of such portrayals have a negative impact on public discourse and policy. Films that offered audiences a humane and humanised understanding of Islam and Muslims were very few.⁸

⁵ Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (Vintage: London, 1997), p.l-li..

⁶ Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims* (Portland: I.B.Tauris & Co, 2002).

⁷ Fawaz Gerges, "Islam and Muslims in the Minds of America," *The Annals of the American Academy*, 588 (July 2003), p.73-89.

⁸ Jack Shaheen, "Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People," *The Annals of the American Academy*, 588 (July 2003), p.171-193.

Within the Australian context a number of important content analyses have been conducted on the representation of Islam and Muslims. My own research conducted prior to 11 September 2001 shows that negative reporting of Islam and Muslims was prevalent in the Australian press years prior to that date, which adds weight to the assertion that fertile ground existed to support the official claims regarding 9/11 and justification for the 'war on terror' in its aftermath.

My Master's thesis, *The Australian Press Coverage of Islam*, involved a content analysis of 1038 articles published in *The Australian*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The West Australian* between 1996 and 2000 that contained the words 'Islam', 'Islamic', 'Muslim', or 'Moslem' in the headline or lead paragraph. The major findings of this research were that the articles:

- Most frequently focused on the Middle East (29%);
- Most frequently focused on war, crisis, or conflict (52%);
 - Most frequently showed Muslims to be fighting against Christians (45% - articles where the religion of the groups at war/conflict were identified);
 - Most frequently showed Muslims as the aggressors in war/conflict (80%);
- Descriptive references attached to the word 'Muslim' or 'Islamic' were frequently derogatory (40% - 'militant', 'fundamentalist', 'extremist', or 'terrorist');
- Described acts proscribed by Islam, such as killing and lynching, as 'Islamic' (73%);
- Rarely portrayed the human side of Muslims (4%).⁹

A more recent study by Shahram Akbarzadeh and Bianca Smith examines the coverage of Islam and Muslims in *The Age* and *Herald Sun* between 11 September 2001 and 31 December 2004. Their study found the prevalence of negative images of Islam and Muslims in the newspapers but not to an extent that they could be considered 'islamophobic'. As important as the construction of stories and choice of words used, the context of the stories was found to be highly significant due to the 'negative impression' the authors inferred would be left with readers. The authors highlight the negativity of stories dealing with war and conflict in which Muslim tended to be portrayed as militants and terrorists. However, half of the stories presented in *The Age* and one quarter of those in the *Herald Sun* were found to demonstrate care in the choice of words, present the diversity of Australian Muslims, and avoid stereotyping.¹⁰

A further contribution to the literature has recently been made by the journalist and media commentator, Peter Manning, whose book, *Us and Them*, presents the findings of his content analysis of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily Telegraph*, and compares their coverage with the author's own investigations of events on the ground in Indonesia, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Palestine. Like the work of Elizabeth

⁹ Halim Rane, "Australian Press Coverage of Islam" (Master's Thesis, Bond University, 2000).

¹⁰ Shahram Akbarzadeh and Bianca Smith, "The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media (*The Age* and *Herald Sun* Newspapers)," (Monash University, 2005).

Poole, Manning finds both the dailies he analyses to be 'orientalist' and stereotypical in their reporting. Among his major findings, commensurate with those of Jack Shaheen in his study of Arabs and Muslims in films, were that Arabs and Muslims overseas were portrayed as violent, "without reason, humanity, or compassion"; Sydney Arab men were portrayed as 'sexual predators'; and Middle Eastern asylum seekers were presented as "tricky, ungrateful, and undeserving".¹¹

Media effects

There is a general tendency to expect the mass media to have at least some effects on audiences. Within the field of media studies, this issue has been a central debate for decades, oscillating between a view of the media as having powerful effects to one where those effects are considered limited. On the issue of attitudes toward Muslims post-11 September 2001, many consider the former to be most accurate. Research by Tanja Dreher, for instance, documents a climate of fear and insecurity in the months immediately following the attacks on New York and Washington. The reporting of which is considered to have produced a crisis in community relations between Muslims and the wider society in New South Wales. The hundreds of attacks, verbal and physical, on Muslims, and those of 'Muslim appearance', were considered to be 'racially and religiously' motivated and in turn produced a climate of fear among Arabs and Muslims, as well as Sikhs in Australia. The predominant attitude underlying the attacks was that Arabs and Muslims were not Australians and were not welcome in the country. The study identified a widespread perception in the community of media reporting as a central contributor to the climate of inter-community tension and racist violence.¹²

In order to bridge the gap or establish the link between the negative reporting of Islam highlighted by numerous content analyses and the racist violence, discrimination, and socio-economic marginalisation of Muslims documented by numerous reports, empirical research is required that tests the public's knowledge of Islam and attitudes towards Muslims. Significant progress in this regard has been made by such researchers as Kevin Dunn. Dunn's research shows that only one-fifth of Australians have a 'reasonable or better' knowledge of Islam, and that half of those he surveyed know 'a little' about the faith. One-third of respondents were completely ignorant of Islam. Feeling threatened by Islam was found to be related to the respondents' knowledge of Islam, with 61 percent of those with a little knowledge of Islam feeling threatened, dropping to 46 percent among those with a reasonable or better knowledge of Islam. Demonstrating the importance of direct contact with Muslims, his study reports that less than half of the respondents knew any Muslims.¹³

¹¹ Peter Manning, *Us and Them: A Journalist's Investigation of Media, Muslims and the Middle East* (Sydney: Random House Australia, 2006), p.37.

¹² Tanja Dreher, "Targeted: Experiences of Racism in NSW after September 11, 2001" (Shopfront Monograph Series, University of Technology Sydney, 2005).

¹³ Kevin Dunn, "Australian Public Knowledge of Islam," *Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies (Studia Islamika)* 12, 1 (2005), p.1-32.

Media representations, knowledge of Islam, and attitudes toward Muslims in Queensland

The research findings presented in this paper are based on a telephone survey that was conducted with a sample of 500 people across south-east Queensland. Respondents were drawn randomly from the Brisbane-metropolitan region, which extends north as far as Noosa, west to Ipswich, and south of the Gold Coast. The survey was fielded by the University of Queensland's Social Research Centre, within the last week of August and first week of September 2006. The survey response rate was 33 percent, calculated by dividing the number of eligible participants who were contacted by the number of completions. The margin of error for proportional findings is +/- 4.4 percent, at a confidence level of 95 percent ($p=0.5$). The data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 14.

The gender mix of the sample was 39 percent male and 61 percent female. Forty-five percent of respondents were aged over 50, 44 percents were aged between 31 and 50, and 11 percent were aged between 16 and 30. In terms of the respondents' highest level of educational qualifications, 10 percent completed primary school, 32 percent high school, while 23 percent possessed a TAFE/trade certificate or diploma, and 25 percent had a Bachelor's degree. Nine percent possessed post-graduate qualifications or higher.

The questions included in this survey sought responses regarding the respondents':

- Knowledge of Islam and its main teachings;
- Interaction with Muslims;
- Acceptance of Muslims as part of Australian society;
- Perceptions of Australian Muslims as a threat to the country;
- Main source of information about Islam and Muslims;
- Perceptions about how Muslims are represented in the media;
- Perceptions about how influential political leaders are on their understanding of Islam and Muslims; and
- Perceptions of statements made by political leaders about Islam and Muslims.

Summary of Findings

The following is a summary of the findings of the survey. Complete details can be found in the full report located at:

http://www.griffith.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0018/52083/MAQ.pdf.

Knowledge:

- 19% state having no knowledge of Islam
- 66% state having 'a little'
 - 56% of those with some knowledge of Islam were able to mention some aspect of Islam's main teachings
 - 34% could not
- 80% were not familiar with the Five Pillars of Islam
- Those with higher qualifications tended to have more knowledge of Islam

Interaction:

- 67% have never met (30%) or rarely interact (37%) with Muslims
- 33% interact with Muslims occasionally, often, or constantly
 - 37% met Muslims through work
 - 14% have Muslim friends or relatives outside of work or university

Acceptance:

- 78% are comfortable with Muslims as part of Australian society
 - 49% of these accept Muslims because they do not consider Muslims different from other people
 - 14% accept Muslims because they are welcome or entitled to Australia as a multicultural, democratic, and free country
 - 12% accept Muslims because Muslim add to Australia's multiculturalism or cultural diversity
 - 8% accept Muslim on the condition that Muslims integrate
- Those with higher educational qualification were more accepting of Muslims
- Those who interacted more with Muslims were more accepting of Muslims

Threat:

- 67% did not regard Muslims as a threat to the country
- 23% did regard Muslims as a threat
 - 51% of these described the threat posed by Muslims in terms of security and terrorism
 - 26% described the threat in cultural terms
 - 5% described the threat in political terms
 - 4% described the threat in demographic terms
- Those with higher educational qualifications were less likely to perceive Australian Muslims as a threat to the country
- Those that interacted more with Muslims were less likely to perceive Australian Muslims as a threat to the country

Sources of knowledge:

- 79% rely on the mass media as a primary source of information about Islam and Muslims
 - 62% rely on television news and current affairs programs
 - 21% rely on Channel Seven
 - 21% rely on the ABC
 - 16% rely on Channel Nine
 - 11% rely on SBS
 - 21% rely on newspapers
 - 58% rely on the *Courier Mail*
 - 8% rely on books
 - 4% rely on the internet
 - 3% rely on radio
- Those with more knowledge of Islam rely less on the mass media, especially television

- Those who interact more with Muslims rely less on the mass media, especially television
- Those more reliant on television, newspapers, and radio were less likely to be accepting of Muslims than those who interact more with Muslims
- Those who rely more on television, newspapers, and radio were more likely to perceive Muslims as a threat to the country than those who interact more with Muslims
- Those who rely on Channel Nine were less likely than others to accept Muslims as part of Australian society and more likely to perceive Muslims as a threat to the country
- Those who rely on SBS, however, had higher levels of knowledge of Islam, were more likely to be accepting of Muslims, and less likely to perceive Muslims as a threat

Evaluations:

- 63% consider the mass media representation of Islam and Muslims to be negative (unfair, biased, inaccurate, stereotypical, misrepresentative, sensationalist)
- 23% consider the mass media representation of Islam and Muslims to be neutral (fair, objective, accurate, honest)
- 41% consider statements made by political leaders to at least partially contribute to their understanding of Islam and Muslims
- 39% regard statements made by the Federal Government about Islam or Muslims to be negative (inaccurate, biased, unfair, ill-informed, designed to serve political purposes)
- 23% regard statements made by the Federal Government about Islam or Muslims to be neutral or positive (fair, accurate, diplomatic, objective).

Discussion

The results of this survey suggest that while almost one-fifth of Queenslanders have no knowledge of Islam, the majority claim to have at least some knowledge of the faith. However, over one-third of those who claimed to have at least some knowledge of Islam were unable to state what they considered to be the main teaching of Islam. With 56 percent of those of those who claimed to have at least some knowledge of Islam able to accurately state at least one of its main teachings, this research suggests that a little less than half of all Queenslanders do in fact have any understanding of Islam. Eighty percent of respondents who claimed to have some knowledge of Islam were not familiar with the Five Pillars.¹⁴ This figure should, however, be considered within the context of Australia's highly secular nature where knowledge of such specific details of any faith, even one's own, is generally not highly valued or considered a priority. This survey also showed education level to be an important factor. Those with higher education levels were shown to demonstrate higher levels of knowledge of Islam.

¹⁴ The five pillars of Islam are: 1) belief in no deity except God and that Muhammad is a prophet of God; 2) daily prayer five times per day; 3) payment of an annual charity or alms giving; 4) fasting during the month of Ramadan; and 5) pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime.

Still more important is interaction. This research confirms that of Kevin Dunn in regard to the importance of first-hand experience or direct interaction with Muslims in increasing positive attitudes and decreasing negative ones. Based on the results of this survey, a little less than one-third of Queenslanders have never met a Muslim, while over two-thirds have had some interaction. For the 70 percent of Queenslanders who have had at least some interaction with Muslims, most of this interaction is in the context of work, school, or university. Almost one-quarter have Muslim friends, relatives, spouses, neighbours, or Muslims associates from other social or cultural contexts, while another one-fifth have come to meet Muslims in public spaces such as shops, parks, or on public transport. Moreover, this survey shows that males, younger Queenslanders, and those with higher levels of education tended to interact more with Muslims than did females, older Queenslanders, and those with lower levels of education.

Based on the findings of this research, Queenslanders are generally accepting of Muslims; almost 80 percent stated that they were comfortable with Muslims as part of Australian society and only 14 percent stated that they were not. Almost half of the respondents based their acceptance of Muslims on the grounds that they did not consider Muslims any different from other people who desire to live in Australia. Moreover, for 14 percent of respondents, accepting Muslims was in-keeping with the free, democratic, and multicultural nature of Australian society; indeed, 12 percent of respondents expressly stated that Muslim added to Australia's multiculturalism and cultural diversity. However, what is also important for a significant proportion of Queenslanders is for all Australians, including Muslims, to respect Australian norms and values.

In spite of reporting less knowledge of Islam and less interaction with Muslims than male respondents, the survey found females to be more accepting of Muslims, suggesting that knowledge and interaction may not be as important in this context. However, when factors such as age and education level are taken into consideration, knowledge of Islam is shown to be less important, but levels of interaction as well as levels of education are shown to be highly significant. Interaction facilitates overcoming 'fear' of the 'other' and associated misconceptions. It also, in the case of Muslims, 'humanises' those that content analyses have repeatedly shown to be dehumanised and demonised in the media. The association of higher education levels with higher levels of acceptance of Muslim may well be due to higher levels of interaction. Moreover, while it is possible that higher levels of education also increase the possibility of acquiring some knowledge of Islam, this was not shown to be a significant factor, but rather, that it is perhaps more likely that higher education levels are associated with more liberal, tolerant views and a resistance to accepting certain stereotypical constructions and popular misconceptions, including that of an 'Islamic threat'.

This research suggests that over two-thirds of Queenslanders (67%) do not accept the notion of the 'Islamic threat', at least in terms of Australian Muslims. In spite of the massive media and political attention given to the issue of 'Islamic terrorism', particularly since 11 September 2001, this research shows that under one-quarter of Queenslanders regard Australian Muslims as a threat to the country, and moreover, only half of these viewed the threat in terms of security or terrorism. While these figures may be interpreted to suggest that overseas events and the media coverage

of them has had a negative impact on how some Queenslanders perceive Muslims, it may also be argued that the impact has been minimal relative to the volume and degree of negativity that numerous content analyses have documented.

What Queenslanders regard as 'knowledge of Islam' has little bearing on their acceptance of Muslims or whether they perceive Muslims as a threat. Simply, it comes down to a subjective definition of what constitutes knowledge and, therefore, divergent perspectives can equally be used to justify or explain differing views. By contrast, interaction with Muslims is a highly important factor for Queenslanders not only holding more positive attitudes towards Muslims and accepting them as part of the society, but also displacing such negative perceptions of Muslims as them being a threat to the country. In short, this research demonstrates that the more one interacts with Muslims, the more accepting he or she is of Muslims in general, and the less likely he or she is to regard Muslims in general as a threat.

This research has confirmed that the mass media is a primary source of information about Islam and Muslim for the vast majority of Queenslanders and remains an important secondary source for the remainder. As expected, television was by far the dominant medium, distantly followed by newspapers and then other sources. Reliance on the mass media is problematic for a range of reasons related to their structure, nature, and organisation, which has been the focus of extensive research and analysis in the field of media studies over many decades. Of particular concern are such factors as the concentration of media ownership, the profit orientation of commercial mass media, and their relationship between media companies and business and political leaders. Such factors have been found to negatively impact on media objectivity, integrity, and responsibility.¹⁵

Importantly, those Queenslanders with Muslim friends or acquaintances tended to rely less on the media, particularly television news and current affairs, for their information about Islam and rely more on their Muslim friends, colleagues, neighbours, and other Muslim acquaintances. Personal interaction is particularly important for the development of positive impressions of Muslims among many Queenslanders and has been shown in this research to correlate highly with an acceptance of Muslims as part of Australian society and a rejection of the notion that Australian Muslims pose a threat to the country. However, the extent to which Muslim friends or acquaintances are capable of providing thorough, objective, and accurate information about Islam beyond the very basics is doubtful given that most Muslims do not have a formal education in Islamic studies.

Moreover, given that many of the issues that concern non-Muslims about Islam reside in the realm of international relations, theology, law and jurisprudence, the vast majority of Muslims would not be up to the task of providing adequate responses to such issues. Ill-informed, inadequate, inaccurate, or misleading responses from Muslims regarding such complex issues could possibly explain why one-fifth of those who stated their personal interaction with Muslim friends, neighbours, work colleagues, and other Muslim acquaintances as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims still perceived Muslims as a threat to the country. Ironically,

¹⁵ Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage, 1988).

however, almost 90 percent of these respondents still accepted Muslims as part of Australian society. Such findings suggest that those who interact with Muslims form a positive impression of Muslim people and accept them as part of the society, but do not gain a sufficient understanding of Islam and are left with some unanswered or unresolved concerns. Arguably, Queenslanders may see their Muslim friends and acquaintances as exceptions to the rule.

It is noteworthy that this survey was conducted during a period of 'relative calm' in terms of tension between 'Islam' and the 'West'. As Tanja Dreher's research demonstrates, negative attitudes towards Muslims along with physical and verbal attacks tend to rise during periods of hostility between Muslims and the 'West' when media coverage of the tension is most intense. Consequently, while this survey recorded relatively high levels of acceptance of Muslims and relatively low levels of perceptions of Muslims as a threat, one would expect the former to drop and the latter to increase during periods of heightened tension or hostility, domestically or overseas.

Another irony is that even though the media has been found to heighten negative attitudes towards Muslims, it is not positively regarded by most Australians. Part of the explanation for the limited impact of the media demonstrated in this study is due to almost two-thirds of Queenslanders recognising the media representation of Islam and Muslims as negative (biased, unfair, inaccurate, ill-informed) rather than accurate, objective and fair. Less than one-quarter of those surveyed considered the media coverage of Islam and Muslims to be neutral in the sense of being fair, accurate, and objective. Thus, it could be surmised that although the media content of Islam and Muslims is generally pejorative, and that the media is a main source of information about Islam and Muslims for the majority of Queenslanders, this has not translated into most Queenslanders holding negative attitudes towards Muslims due to the media's perceived lack of credibility.

This finding is consistent with research published in 2001 commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Authority. The study, *Sources of News and Current Affairs*, based on a national survey of over 1,600 adults found that 90 percent of Australians find media owners to be either 'somewhat' or 'very' influential on the content of news and current affairs, second only to 'big business' and 'commercial sponsors' in terms of influence. The study also showed that most of Australia's top rating commercial news and current affairs programs were regarded by most respondents as lacking credibility due to being 'sensationalised/tabloidism', 'biased/subjective', and 'commercialised/ratings-driven'.¹⁶ Moreover, as this study has shown, the potential for media influence is undermined by education and the fact that interpersonal interaction with Muslims is a fairly regular occurrence for over one-third of Queenslanders.

Conclusion

Muslims in the West, including Australia, consistently blame the mass media for what they perceive as misconceptions about Islam, negative attitudes toward Muslims, and

¹⁶ Jeffery Brand, Deborah Archbold, and Halim Rane, "Stage Two: The Audience", *Sources of News and Current Affairs* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Authority, 2001), p.259-396.

hostile relations between the Muslim community and certain segments of the wider society. Content analyses of media coverage consistently demonstrate that Islam and Muslims are portrayed pejoratively. The current definition of what is newsworthy has ensured that the image of Islam and Muslims that is presented is very narrow in its view of Islam and the Muslim world. To the extent that the mass media is a society's primary source of information about Islam and Muslims, it will be unable to distinguish between Islam, the way of life embraced by one-fifth of humanity residing across the globe, and mass media Islam, the version of Islam constructed by the media on the basis of repeated slogans and images of violence, terrorism, backwardness, and barbarity in the name of Islam. Ultimately, the responsibility lies with Muslims to define 'Islam' and what is 'Islamic' and to educate fellow Muslims accordingly. Priority areas will include issues of war and conflict, gender equality, human rights, crime and punishment, political organization, and overall, an appropriate methodology for interpreting and process of applying Islamic law. In the meantime, however, as this research has shown, the most effective means of overcoming the negative impact of mass media Islam is for Muslims and their fellow Australians to interact and get to know one another in a way that is *unmediated*.