

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

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Executive Summary

The image of Islam and Muslims has often been portrayed in a negative fashion by politicians, the mass media and Orientalist literature. The relationship between Islam and the 'West' has also been depicted as one of confrontation and indifference. Such depictions are not a recent phenomenon, but has been handed down by Orientalist discourse as early as the seventeenth century. Certainly, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and other international events as the Bali bombing, helped exacerbate this image.

In Australia, it has become the norm for some media outlets and politicians to paint Australian Muslims and Islam in a pejorative and derogatory manner. According to some scholars this led to constructing Australian Muslims as the new 'other.' This social misconception had a detrimental impact on the lives of many Australian Muslims, and has certainly strained the relationship between them and the wider Australian community.

In order to practically create better understanding about Islam and the Muslims, and to build sustainable bridges between Queensland Muslims and the wider society, Multicultural Affairs Queensland (MAQ) and the local Muslim community formed the Muslim Community Reference Group (MCRG) in 2006. Working with, and not on behalf of, the local Muslim community brought immediate positive and constructive results. This project is one of them.

Multicultural Affairs Queensland commissioned this research to establish an empirical basis that can inform policy concerning inter-community relations. As content analysis of the media representation of the Queensland Muslim community would be limited in its capacity to yield the necessary data, this research sought an audience analysis. The aim was to provide insight as to the impact of media representations of Islam and Muslims on the Queensland Muslim community by studying the effects that such representations have on Queenslanders.

A telephone survey was conducted with a sample of 500 people across south-east Queensland, 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 instrument was designed on the basis of semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were conducted at random with people fitting a range of demographic profiles (age, gender, education level, and occupation). Participants

were asked about their understanding of Islam; their perceptions of Muslims and Islam; to more challenging questions such as whether they accept Muslims in Australia and if they believed that Muslims were a threat to national security. The results were promising.

Amongst other findings, this research shows that almost 80 percent of Queenslanders stated that they were comfortable with Muslims as part of Australian society and only 14 percent stated that they were not; and over two-thirds of Queenslanders (67%) do not accept the notion that Australian Muslims are a national threat. Of importance to inter-community relations, this research also shows that knowing more about Islam and interaction with Muslims helps in overcoming the 'fear' of the 'other' and associated misconceptions.

Additionally, the findings of this report confirm the conclusion reached by scholars like Kevin Dunn that first-hand experience or direct interaction with Muslims helps increase positive attitudes and decrease negative ones. Over two-thirds of Queenslanders stated that they have had some interaction with Muslims whether at work, school or university. Others have Muslim friends, relatives, spouses or associates, all of which helped shape their positive attitudes towards Muslims. An important conclusion that can be derived from this is that creating better understanding and bridging the gap between communities can be best achieved at the grass-roots level.

Of equal importance is the fact that only a minority of Queenslanders (14 percent) are affected by the negative nature of media coverage of Islam and Muslims. Despite the fact that the findings show that the mass media is a primary source of information about Islam and Muslims for the vast majority of Queenslanders. It is noteworthy that sixty-three percent of Queenslanders described the media's representation of Islam and Muslims as being 'biased,' 'sensationalist,' 'unfair,' 'negative,' 'stereotypical' and 'uniformed.'

Overall, it can be safely stated that this research assists in debunking the myth that Australian Muslims are considered a national threat and unaccepted in Australian society. By extension, it strengthens the long-held notion that Australians are a people of 'fair-go' whose understanding of the 'other' is not necessarily constructed by the mass media.

Finally, the Queensland Government should be congratulated for funding this seminal project, as part of its Muslim Community Engagement Strategy, through Multicultural Affairs Queensland.

Background

The impetus for this research is the commitment of both the Muslim community of Queensland and Multicultural Affairs Queensland (MAQ) to improve inter-community understanding and harmony within the state. Relations between Muslims and the wider society have been strained over the past decade and particularly since 2001. Media coverage of overseas events involving Muslims as well as the representation of various Australian adherents of Islam are widely regarded as central to fostering negative perceptions of Muslims, which are seen to be perpetuated by low levels of understanding of Islam in general. Within this context, it has been argued, Muslims have generally become underprivileged in economic, political, and social terms, facing disadvantage and discrimination.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. Within the field of media studies it has been established that in the absence of direct or first-hand experience of people, places, or events, the mass media generally becomes the primary source of information.²

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.³ Research, specifically content analysis, has continued to demonstrate that Islam and Muslims have overwhelmingly been portrayed pejoratively by the mass media.⁴ 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.⁵

Given this context, Multicultural Affairs Queensland commissioned this research in the interest of establishing an empirical basis from which

¹ Nahid Kabir and Clive Moore, "Muslims in Australia: The New Disadvantaged?" 11 November 2003, The Brisbane Institute, http://www.brisinst.org.au/resources/brisbane_institute_kabir_moore_muslim.html (accessed 12 July 2006).

² Bryant J. & Zillman, D. (Eds.) (2002). *Media Effects: Advances in theory and research*. Elbaum Associates: New Jersey.

³ Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (Vintage: London, 1997).

⁴ Halim Rane, "Australian Press Coverage of Islam" (Master's Thesis, Bond University, 2000).

⁵ Peter Manning, *Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism* (Australian Centre for Independent Journalism: Broadway, 2004).

to inform policy concerning inter-community relations. In the Queensland context, what policy-makers, academics, and others concerned with inter-community harmony require, is research that would provide insight as to the impact of media representations of Islam and Muslims *on* the Muslim community of Queensland by studying the *effects* that such representations have on Queenslanders. What is needed is not another content analysis, but audience analysis. Content analysis of the media representation of the Muslim community of Queensland would be limited in its capacity to yield the necessary data in terms of inter-community relations. This study has, therefore, built upon the large number of content analyses concerning the media representation of Muslims and taken this research to the next level.

Literature Review

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 study.

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

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.

discourse and policy. Films that offered audiences a humane and humanised understanding of Islam and Muslims were very few.⁸

Within the Australian context a number of important content analyses have been conducted on the representation of Islam and Muslims. Research by Halim Rane 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.

Halim Rane's work, *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 his 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 examined 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

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

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

be left with readers. The authors highlighted 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

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.¹¹

In order to bridge the gap 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

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

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

contact with Muslims, his study reports that less than half of the respondents knew any Muslims.¹²

A further contribution to the literature has recently been made by the esteemed 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 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".¹³

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

¹³ Peter Manning, *Us and Them: A Journalist's Investigation of Media, Muslims and the Middle East* (Sydney: Random House Australia, 2006), p.37.

Methodology

The aim of this research is to gain insights into the effects of media representations on the understanding of Islam and attitudes toward Muslims among Queenslanders. Its objectives are to:

- Identify the level of understanding of Islam among Queenslanders;
- Identify the attitudes toward Muslims among Queenslanders;
- Identify the dominant sources that shape the understanding of Islam and attitudes toward Muslims among Queenslanders;
- Analyse the impact of media representations on the understanding of Islam and attitudes toward Muslims in Queensland; and
- Produce recommendations for policy makers responsible for matters of concern identified by the research.

The approach of this research was influenced by a theoretical perspective known as Cultivation Analysis, which was developed by George Gerbner in the 1960s and remains today a dominant effects theory in the field of media studies. The basic thesis of Cultivation Analysis is that heavy exposure to certain media will cultivate within audiences a perception of reality that is more consistent with the 'media version' of reality than reality itself.¹⁴

Based on the fact that Muslims represent little more than one percent of the total population of Australia (and an even smaller proportion of the total population of Queensland), opportunities for direct or first-hand interaction with Muslims is relatively limited. Consequently, it is expected that the mass media is, for the majority of Australians, the primary source of information about Islam and Muslims. Given the generally pejorative representation of Islam and Muslims in the mass media, as demonstrated by numerous content analyses, one would expect that a general lack of understanding of Islam coupled with negative attitudes toward Muslims to be prevalent.

In order to test these hypotheses, a telephone survey was conducted with a sample of 500 people across south-east Queensland, 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 instrument was designed on the basis of semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were conducted at random with people fitting

¹⁴ Nancy Signorielli and Michael Morgan (eds), *Cultivation Analysis: New Directions in Media Effects Research* (Sage: Newbury Park, 1990).

a range of demographic profiles (age, gender, education level, and occupation).

The survey was fielded by the University of Queensland, Social Research Centre, within the last week of August and first week of September 2006. Participants were telephoned and invited to participate in the survey based on a random selection method. 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.

Findings

Knowledge of Islam

When asked to rate their own knowledge of Islam, the majority of respondents stated having 'a little' (66 percent) or 'a fair amount' (14 percent). Almost one-fifth of respondents stated their knowledge of Islam was 'none at all' (19 percent). Of those who expressed at least some knowledge of Islam, when asked what they considered to be the main teaching of Islam, most (56 percent) were able to give accurate responses, which included 'to believe in and/or worship God' (19 percent), 'to follow the Prophet Muhammad and/or the Quran' (19 percent) 'same as or similar to other monotheistic religions' (9 percent), or 'to live a moral/ethical life' (4 percent). However, 34 percent of respondents stated that they did not know or were unsure, which is consistent with the findings of Dunn's research.

Respondents were also asked whether they were familiar with the Five Pillars of Islam, which are widely regarded as representing the core teachings or essence of Islam. Only 16 percent responded in the affirmative, while 80 percent stated that they were not familiar with the Five Pillars.

When the gender of respondents was cross-tabulated with their knowledge of Islam, the data showed that males tended to rate their knowledge of Islam higher than did females. While 16 percent of males stated that their knowledge of Islam was 'none at all', 21 percent of females stated the same. Twenty-two percent of males stated having 'a fair amount' of knowledge of Islam, but only 10 percent of females stated the same. Again, when gender was cross-tabulated with knowledge of the Five Pillars of Islam, proportionately more male than female respondents reported that they were familiar with the Five Pillars.

When the education level of respondents was cross-tabulated with knowledge of Islam, the data showed that those with higher levels of education tended to report higher levels of knowledge of Islam. With regard to knowledge of the Five Pillars of Islam, higher proportions of respondents who stated that they are familiar with the Five Pillars were found among those with higher education levels.

Interaction with Muslims

Among the observations made in the research by Kevin Dunn is that first-hand interaction or direct experience with Muslims is a central factor in increasing positive attitudes toward Muslims and reducing negative ones. This study, therefore, asked respondents to describe the extent of their interaction with Muslim people. The majority (67 percent) stated that they had 'never' (30 percent) or 'rarely' (37 percent) had any interaction with Muslim people. Twenty-three percent stated that they interacted with Muslims 'occasionally', while 10 percent stated that they did so 'a lot' (8 percent) or 'constantly' (2 percent).

Most respondents know or have met Muslims through their work (37 percent), either based on a customers/client relationship, including school teachers with Muslim students (20 percent), or as work colleagues (16 percent). Fourteen percent of respondents stated that they have Muslim friends, while 9 percent met Muslims through overseas travel. A further 7 percent stated their interaction with Muslims occurred in the context of college or university. Of those who stated that they came to know Muslim through overseas travel, 70 percent stated a country within south-east Asia as their destination, prominently Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. The most popular destinations in the Middle East where the respondents met Muslims were Turkey, Egypt and Israel/Palestine.

When levels of interaction were cross-tabulated with the gender of respondents, the data showed that male respondents tended to state slightly higher levels of interaction with Muslims than female respondents. The data also showed that younger respondents tended to interact with Muslims more than older ones, when the age of respondents was cross-tabulated with levels of interaction. Moreover, cross-tabulation of education and interaction levels showed higher a correlation between higher education levels and higher levels of interaction with Muslims.

Attitudes toward Muslims

Acceptance

There is an impression that may be derived from the media and certain political leaders, and indeed Muslims themselves, that the Australian public is generally uncomfortable with Muslims in Australia. This study asked respondents whether they are personally comfortable with Muslims being part of Australian society. Seventy-eight percent stated that they were comfortable with Muslims. Perhaps surprisingly, only 14 percent stated that they were not, while 8 percent stated that they were unsure.

When asked for the reason why they were or were not comfortable with Muslims being part of Australian society, of those who stated that they were comfortable with Muslims, almost half (49 percent) responded that Muslims are 'not different from' or 'just like everyone else'. Fourteen percent made reference to Australia being a 'democratic', 'multicultural', or 'free' country where others including Muslims are 'welcome' or 'entitled' and that they disagree with discrimination based on religion. Twelve percent of respondents stated their reason as being that Muslims 'add to multiculturalism and cultural diversity'. Eight percent of respondents qualified their acceptance of Muslims on the condition that they adopt Australian rules, laws, and values, or otherwise integrate, including by learning English.

Of the 71 respondents who stated that they were not comfortable with Muslims being part of Australian society, almost one-quarter (24 percent) expressed some concern about Muslim violence, militancy, or terrorism. Thirty percent expressed concern that Muslims can't or won't 'integrate' or 'assimilate' as their reason. A further 14 percent of this group stated a concern that Muslims want to impose their ways on others or somehow change Australia. Perhaps interestingly, even among this group, who stated that they were not comfortable with Muslims being part of Australian society, only 6 percent stated their position as being due to Muslim dress.

When gender was cross-tabulated with acceptance of Muslims as part of Australian society, the data showed female respondents to be slightly more accepting of Muslims than male respondents. Eighty percent of females stated that they were personally comfortable with Muslims as part of Australian society and only 12 percent stated that they were not, while 75 percent of male respondents stated that they

were personally comfortable with Muslims as part of Australian society and 18 percent stated that they were not.

When age was cross-tabulated with acceptance of Muslims as part of Australian society, the data showed that respondents under 50 years of age tended to be more accepting of Muslims than those over 51 years. Additionally, when educational level was cross-tabulated with acceptance of Muslims as part of Australian society, the data clearly showed levels of acceptance of Muslims to increase with levels of education, moving from 64 percent among those with a primary school education, to 73 percent (high school education), to 83 percent (TAFE/trade certificate/diploma) and 81 percent (Bachelor's degree), to 89 percent (post-graduate qualifications), and 100 percent among those with doctoral or post-doctoral qualifications.

When knowledge of Islam was cross-tabulated with acceptance of Muslims as part of Australian society, that data showed little significant difference in the levels of acceptance between the various levels of knowledge of respondents.

Table 1: Knowledge of Islam by Acceptance of Muslims as part of Australian society

Knowledge of Islam	Acceptance of Muslims			
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Unsure (%)	Total (%)
None at all (%)	75.5	16.0	8.5	100.0
A little (%)	79.9	12.5	7.6	100.0
A fair amount (%)	72.2	19.4	8.3	100.0
A lot (%)	80.0	20.0	0.0	100.0
Total (%)	78.0	14.2	7.8	100.0

When levels of interaction with Muslims was cross-tabulated with acceptance of Muslims as part of Australian society, the data showed

levels of acceptance to increase with levels of interaction along with a reduction in levels of uncertainty or opposition to Muslims as part of Australian society as levels of interaction increased. Table 2 shows the proportional increase in acceptance of Muslims as part of Australian society among respondents with higher levels of interaction with Muslims.

Table 2: Level of interaction by level of acceptance of Muslims as part of Australian society

Interaction	Acceptance of Muslims			
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Unsure (%)	Total (%)
Never (%)	66.4	22.1	11.4	100.0
Rarely (%)	76.5	14.4	9.1	100.0
Occasionally (%)	87.9	8.6	3.4	100.0
Often (%)	94.7	2.6	2.6	100.0
Constantly (%)	100.0	.0	.0	100.0
Total (%)	78.0	14.2	7.8%	100.0

Threat

Globally, the question has been raised concerning the issue of a 'Muslim' or 'Islamic threat'. The debate has its origins long before 11 September 2001 and was specifically addressed in the 1990s by a range of scholars, including John Esposito.¹⁵ In Australia the question has been raised in the context of immigration, asylum seekers, the 'war on terror', and national security. Consequently, this research asked respondents whether they see Australian Muslims as a threat to the country. Sixty-seven percent stated that they did not consider Australian Muslims as a threat to the country, while 23 percent stated that they did. Ten percent stated that they were unsure.

Those who stated that Australian Muslims are a threat to the country were then asked how they would best describe or define the threat

¹⁵ John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (3rd ed), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

that Australian Muslims posed. Slightly more than half of these respondents (51 percent) defined the threat in terms of security. Just over one-quarter of this group of respondents (26 percent) defined the threat as 'cultural', in terms of Muslim culture being practiced. Only 5 percent of this group defined the threat posed by Australian Muslims in political terms, and only 4 percent regarded the threat in demographic terms.

When the perceived threat posed by Australian Muslims to the country was cross-tabulated with gender, the data showed 25 percent of male and 22 percent of female respondents consider Muslims a threat to the country, which 68 percent of male and 66 percent of female respondents did not consider Australian Muslims to be a threat to the country. In terms of age, higher proportions of perceived threat were found among older respondents when age was cross-tabulated with the perceived threat posed by Australian Muslims to the country. Additionally, when education level was cross-tabulated with the perceived threat posed by Australian Muslims to the country, the data showed that the perception that Muslims posed a threat to decline as education level increased.

When the knowledge of Islam reported by respondents was cross-tabulated with the perceived threat posed by Australian Muslims to the country, the data showed little variance among the reported levels of knowledge. Proportions of respondents who stated that Muslims did pose a threat ranged between 20 and 26 percent across all knowledge levels, and ranged between 60 and 68 percent across all knowledge levels among respondents who did not perceive a Muslim threat. Proportions tended to peak among those who claimed to have 'a little' or 'a fair amount' of knowledge of Islam.

However, when levels of interaction with Muslims was cross-tabulated with the perceived threat posed by Australian Muslims to the country, the data showed that as levels of interaction increased, perceptions that Australian Muslim did not pose a threat also increased. Fifty-five of respondents who stated that they had 'never' met a Muslim stated that they did not see Australian Muslims as a threat to the country. This proportion increased to 66 percent among respondents who reported 'rarely' interacting with Muslims, 78 percent among those who reported 'occasionally' interacting with Muslims, 79 percent among those who reported 'often' interacting with Muslims, and 90 percent among those who reported 'constantly' interacting with Muslims.

Sources of knowledge

Given that Muslims comprise a very small proportion of the Queensland population, it was assumed that opportunities for direct experience or interaction with Muslims would be minimal and under such circumstances the media would be a primary source of information about Islam and Muslim people. The survey asked respondents for their 'main source of information about Islam and Muslim people'.

Overwhelming, mass media were the primary sources of information with 79 percent of respondents stating a particular media source. Moreover, even among those respondents who stated non-media sources, when asked about the importance of the mass media as a source of information about Islam and Muslim people 63 percent stated that the media's importance to them as being 'a little' (33 percent) 'a fair amount' (16 percent) or 'very' important (13 percent). Commensurate with expectations, most respondents stated 'television news and current affairs programs' as their main source of information about Islam and Muslim people (62 percent), followed by newspapers (21 percent), books (8 percent), internet (4 percent), radio (3 percent), and news magazines (2 percent).

The main non-media sources of information about Islam and Muslim people included personal interaction with Muslims, including friends, relatives, neighbours, and work colleagues (15 percent). Only 6 respondents in total stated that teachers, university lecturers, or religious leaders are their main source of information about Islam and Muslim people.

The specific television channels from which most respondents stated they acquired most of their information about Islam and Muslim people is Channel 7 (21 percent) and ABC (21 percent), followed by Channel 9 (16 percent), SBS (11 percent) and Channel 10 (9 percent). Smaller proportions of respondents stated such cable channels as Sky and Fox as their main sources.

For those who stated newspapers as their main source of information about Islam and Muslim people, most relied on the *Courier Mail* (58 percent) and over one-quarter on *The Australian* (27 percent). Among those who stated books as their main source of information, few could name specific titles and no particular books featured prominently in the data. Interestingly, however, a few respondents stated that the 'Bible' was their main source of information about Islam. Others

mentioned George Negus' *The World from Islam* and Abdullah Saeed's *Islam in Australia*.

When the respondents' knowledge of Islam was cross-tabulated with their main source of information about Islam, the data showed that respondents who reported higher levels of knowledge of Islam relied significantly less on television news and current affairs programs. Respondents who reported their knowledge of Islam as being 'none at all' comprised 67 percent of those who stated television news and current affairs as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims. This proportion dropped to 50 percent among those who reported having 'a little' knowledge, 28 percent among those who reported having 'a fair amount' of knowledge, and zero percent on those who stated having 'a lot' of knowledge about Islam.

The data also showed a correlation between higher levels of knowledge of Islam and other media sources, namely books (6 percent among those who reported 'a little' knowledge, 14 percent among those who reported 'a fair amount' of knowledge, and 20 percent among those who reported having 'a lot' of knowledge about Islam), and the internet to a lesser extent.

Additionally, the data showed a positive correlation between interaction with Muslims and knowledge of Islam. Interaction with Muslims, including friends, neighbours, teachers, and work colleagues, was reported as the 'main source of information about Islam and Muslims' by only 3 percent of that who stated their knowledge of Islam being 'none at all', 14 percent by those who stated having 'a little' knowledge, 32 percent by those who stated having 'a fair amount' of knowledge, and 60 percent by those who stated having 'a lot' of knowledge of Islam.

Further to this point, when main source of information was cross-tabulated with level of interaction with Muslims, the data showed major reductions in television news and current affairs as the main source of information about Islam and Muslims the higher the respondent's level of interaction with Muslims. Among the respondents who stated television news and current affairs as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims, 64 percent stated having 'never' met a Muslim, 53 percent stated 'rarely' interacting with Muslims, 34 percent stated interacting with Muslims 'occasionally', and only 26 percent stated interacting with Muslims 'often'.

As expected, Muslim friends, neighbours, work colleagues, and other Muslim acquaintances were an increasingly important source of

information about Islam the higher the respondents' level of interaction with Muslims. Interaction with Muslims was reported as the main source of information about Islam and Muslims by 8 percent of those who stated 'rarely' interacting with Muslims, 26 percent by those who stated 'occasionally' interacting with Muslims, 50 percent by those who stated 'often' interacting with Muslims, and 60 percent by those who stated 'constantly' interacting with Muslims.

When respondents' main source of information about Islam and Muslims was cross-tabulated with whether respondents were comfortable with Muslims as part of Australian society, the data showed lower levels of acceptance of Muslims among those who stated either television, newspapers, or radio as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims compared with those who stated their personal interaction with Muslim friends, neighbours, work colleagues, and other Muslim acquaintances. Of those who stated either television, newspapers, or radio as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims, 76 percent stated that they were comfortable with Muslims as part of Australian society, while 15 percent stated that they were not and 9 percent stated that they were unsure.

By contrast, 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, 88 percent stated that they were comfortable with Muslims as part of Australian society, while only 5 percent stated that they were not and 7 percent stated that they were unsure.

When respondents' main source of information about Islam and Muslims was cross-tabulated with whether they perceived Australian Muslims as a threat to the country, the data showed the perception of a threat to be higher among those who stated either television, newspapers, or radio as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims compared with those who stated their personal interaction with Muslim friends, neighbours, work colleagues, and other Muslim acquaintances. Of those who stated either television, newspapers, or radio as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims, 24 percent stated that they perceived Australian Muslims as a threat to the country, while 65 percent stated that they did not and 12 percent stated that they were unsure.

By contrast, 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, 21

percent stated that they perceived Australian Muslims as a threat to the country, while 76 percent stated that they did not and 3 percent stated that they were unsure.

When television channels that respondents reported as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims were cross-tabulated with respondents' reported knowledge of Islam, the data showed a decrease in reliance on commercial channels, such as Seven and Nine among respondents who reported higher levels of knowledge of Islam. Of those who stated their knowledge of Islam to be 'none at all', 22 percent stated Channel Seven and 21 percent Channel Nine as their main source of information, while of those claimed 'a little' knowledge of Islam, 22 percent relied on Channel Seven and 15 percent on Channel Nine, and of those who claimed they have 'a fair amount' of knowledge of Islam, only 10 percent relied on Channel Seven and Channel Nine.

By contrast, the reverse was observed in the case of SBS. Of those who stated their knowledge of Islam to be 'none at all', 2 percent stated SBS as their main source of information, while of those claimed 'a little' knowledge of Islam, 14 percent relied on SBS, and of those who claimed they have 'a fair amount' of knowledge of Islam, 25 percent relied on SBS.

In regard to whether respondents were comfortable with Muslims as part of Australian society, no significant difference was observable as to whether the respondent accepted Muslims or not when this question was cross-tabulated with main television channel of information. The notable exception, however, was Channel Nine. Only in the case of respondents who stated that Channel Nine was their main source of information about Islam and Muslims did the data show a significantly higher proportion of respondents who did not accept Muslims as part of Australian society than those who did (21 percent to 15 percent). It should be noted that of all respondents who stated Channel Nine as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims, 72 percent stated that they did accept Muslims as part of Australian society and only 18 percent did not.

It is noteworthy, however, that the proportion of respondents who did not accept Muslims as part of Australian society was highest among Channel Nine viewers (18 percent), as compared to 14 percent for Channel Seven, Channel 10, and SBS, and 12 percent for ABC. Acceptance of Muslims was highest among Channel Seven viewers (82 percent), followed by SBS viewers (79 percent), Channel 10 and ABC (77 percent), and then Channel Nine (72 percent).

Of those respondents who reported television as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims, perception of Australian Muslims as a threat to the country was lowest among Channel Seven and SBS viewers (17 and 18 percent respectively) and highest among ABC, Channel Ten, and Channel Nine viewers (28, 27 and 26 percent respectively). Among respondents who rejection the notion of Australian Muslims as a threat to the country, the highest proportion of respondents was viewers of SBS (79 percent), followed by Channel Ten, Channel Seven, and ABC (68, 67, and 65 percent respectively). Channel Nine showed the lowest proportion of respondents who rejected the notion of Australian Muslims as a threat to the country (54 percent).

As mentioned above, for respondents who stated that newspapers were their main source of information about Islam and Muslims, almost 60 percent relied on the *Courier Mail*. It is noteworthy, therefore, that almost one-quarter (23 percent) of respondents who stated the *Courier Mail* as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims stated that they are not comfortable with Muslims as part of Australian society. Moreover, over one-quarter (26 percent) of respondents who stated the *Courier Mail* as their main source of information about Islam and Muslims stated that they consider Australian Muslims a threat to the country.

Media Representation of Muslims

When respondents were asked how they would describe the representation of Islam and Muslims in the media, almost two-thirds identified it as negative. Sixty-three percent described the media's representation of Islam and Muslims in such negative terms as 'biased' (16 percent), 'sensationalist' (9 percent), and other such terms as 'unfair', 'negative', 'misrepresentative', 'stereotypical', and 'uninformed'.

Twenty-three percent of respondents, however, described the representation of Islam and Muslims in the media in neutral terms, such as 'fair' (17 percent), 'accurate' (1 percent), as well as 'objective', and 'honest'. Several respondents described the media's representation of Islam and Muslims as 'restrained', 'not harsh enough', and even 'biased toward Muslims'.

Political Leaders and Muslims

Respondents were asked the extent to which Australian political leaders contribute to their understanding of Islam and Muslim people. Although 59 percent responded by stating 'not at all', the remaining 41 percent stated that Australian political leaders contribute to their understanding of Islam and Muslim people 'a little' (36 percent), 'a fair amount' (4 percent) or 'a lot' (1 percent).

When asked how they would describe statements made by the Federal Government about Islam and Muslims, the largest proportion of respondents (39 percent) described the Federal Government's statements in negative terms, such as 'made to serve political objectives' (7 percent), 'biased' (5 percent), inaccurate (4 percent), and 'sensationalist' (3 percent).

However, only a slightly smaller proportion of respondents (33 percent) described the Federal Government's statements in positive or neutral terms, including 'fair' (20 percent) and accurate (4 percent). Other respondents stated that they 'could not recall any statements by the Federal Government concerning Islam and Muslims', that statements made were 'cautious', 'restrained', 'politically correct', 'diplomatic', or suggested the Government was 'sitting on the fence'.

Summary of Findings

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 or rarely interact 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 some understanding of Islam. While the fact that 80 percent of respondents who claimed to have some knowledge of Islam were not familiar with the Five Pillars may suggest otherwise, this figure should 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. Although this survey showed males to report higher levels of knowledge of Islam than females overall, the difference may not be significant if one takes into consideration a male tendency to overestimate his abilities or knowledge. A considerable more important factor than gender is education level as those with higher education levels were shown to demonstrate higher levels of knowledge of Islam.

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. Most of this interaction occurs in the context of work, school, or university, although 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 Muslim than did females, older Queenslanders, and those with lower levels of education.

Based on the findings of this research, Queenslanders generally are 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, which is consistent with what Islam expects of its followers wherever they may reside.

With regard to the multitude of research that has demonstrated the pejorative nature of media coverage of Islam and Muslims, this survey suggests that only a minority of 14 percent of respondents show any sign of being affected by this coverage. This group demonstrated stereotypical understandings of Islam and Muslims, basing their unwillingness to accept Muslims as part of Australian society on such concerns as terrorism, unwillingness to integrate, and desire to impose views or ways on others. While it is certain that some Muslims do commit acts of terrorism, and are intolerant, reluctant, and obstinate, that this not the case of the majority of Muslims, and even less so in the case of Australian Muslims, but still the principal concern of some Queenslanders, is indicative of the effects on some of viewing Islam and the Muslim world through the narrow window of media coverage.

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 the '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 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 has 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.¹⁶

Importantly, with the availability of interpersonal interaction with Muslims, Queenslanders tended to rely less on the media, particularly

¹⁶ Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage, 1988).

television news and current affairs, for their information about Islam and more on their Muslim friends, colleagues, neighbours, and other Muslim acquaintances. It is also noteworthy that television is not shown by this research to be a particularly useful medium for increasing one's knowledge of Islam; those who relied on television as their main source of information about Islam demonstrated less knowledge than those who relied on other sources such as books, or their personal interaction with Muslims. A likely explanation lies in the structural capacity of television news to only offer superficial highlights of issues and events without the possibility of providing the necessary background information or analysis, or indeed presenting the most central aspects of an issue or event that cannot be represented visually but require detailed explanation.

Conversely, books, news magazines and the internet are among those media that do have the capacity to provide the necessary background information, explanation, and analysis. The problem is that such media are the main sources of information for a much smaller proportion of the population. 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 even this source is capable of providing thorough, objective, and accurate information about Islam is questionable, 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, even the vast majority of Muslims who have a formal education in Islamic studies 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 perceived Australian Muslims as a threat to the country, but, ironically, almost 90 percent 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.

While it must be reiterated that overall the impact of the media, even television news and current affairs, has been shown by this research to be limited, certain channels, namely SBS seem to be associated with higher proportions of viewers who demonstrate more positive attitudes toward Islam and Muslims. However, other media, namely Channel Nine, and also the *Courier Mail*, seem to be associated with higher proportions of viewers and readers that demonstrate more negative attitudes toward Islam and Muslims. An understanding of such findings would have to begin with a content analysis of the representation of Islam and Muslims in these sources and then proceed to utilise some form of experiment or at least some focus group sessions based on the findings.

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.

Arguably, part of the explanation for the limited impact of the media demonstrated in this study is largely 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'.¹⁷ Moreover, 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.

¹⁷ 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.

Recommendations

1. Initiatives need to be undertaken that address the low levels of knowledge of Islam among Queenslanders. As Islam is experiencing a rapid rate of growth and is an important issue of concern, discussion and debate, nationally and globally, it is pertinent that democratic, multicultural societies demonstrate a commitment to maintaining an informed citizenry. An informed citizenry is not only essential during periods of policy debate, but also to offset the negative backlash that tends to increase during periods of tension or hostility.

Initiatives such as Islamic Awareness Week and Open Mosque Days may be useful in this regard. Ultimately, however, provision must be made for Queenslanders to undertake more formal studies of Islam, either in the form of lectures, seminars, one-off courses, or certificates. Those that play more extensive roles as opinion leaders, such as community leaders, school teachers, journalists, editors, and certain political leaders and public servants would be important target groups for such a professional-development initiative. Formal Islamic studies would also be of significant benefit to the Muslim community in forging a cohesive, moderate approach to Islam that is conducive to Australian society.

2. Initiatives need to be undertaken that increase opportunities for interaction between mainstream Queenslanders and the Muslim community. Levels of interaction are currently low. Increasing levels of interacting will increase the acceptance of Muslims, reduce fears and concerns of an 'Islamic threat', and ultimately encourage a more natural integration of Muslims into mainstream society. Moreover, increased levels of interaction with Muslims will offset the potential negative impact on community relations instigated by pejorative media coverage.

Initiatives that support the entry of more Muslims into mainstream organisations, particularly positions with a higher public profile, including the public service, would be particularly conducive. Muslims not only need to be more engaged in mainstream society to facilitate interaction, but *be seen to be* more engaged in order to offset perceptions of difference, alienation, and rejection.

3. Both the State and Federal Government as well as the Muslim community and general public need to play a more active role in encouraging the media to report on and represent Islam and Muslims more responsibly. Internal policies of media organisations, concerning their reporting on issues pertaining to Islam and Muslims, could be reviewed in consultation with representatives from the Muslim community. Moreover, incentives should be given to media organisations to support the professional development of their relevant journalists and editors in terms of their knowledge and understanding of Islam and Muslims.

Conclusion

This project was commissioned by Multicultural Affairs Queensland to examine the impact of media representation on the understanding of Islam and attitudes toward Muslims in Queensland.

The aim of this research was to conduct an audience analysis to examine a number of pertinent issues that can effect inter-relations between Muslims and non-Muslim Australians. The project surveyed 500 people across south-east Queensland, drawn randomly from the Brisbane-metropolitan region, which extends as far as Noosa, west to Ipswich, and south of the Gold Coast.

The questions included in the survey sought responses to a number of issues including respondents knowledge of Islam and its main teachings; interaction with Muslims; acceptance of Muslims as part of Australian society; and perceptions of Australian Muslims as a threat to the country.

Contrary to common understandings, and of significance to inter-relations between Australian Muslims and non-Muslims, the findings of this research demonstrate that about 78% of Queenslanders are comfortable with Muslims as part of the Australian society, while 67% did not regard Muslims as a threat to Australia. This is a departure from what is commonly portrayed in some media outlets and political rhetoric.

This research also demonstrates that the greater the knowledge about Islam, and the more interactions with Muslims, leads to a reduction and overcoming of the 'fear' of the 'other' and associated misconceptions. In the case of Australian Muslims, this allows for the shattering of the dehumanised and demonised image that has become the preferred paradigm of the media.

In this regard, this research is a landmark study in the field of inter-relations between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians. It allows for a counter-narrative of the dominant pejorative discourse about Australian Muslims and their relationship with mainstream Australians.

Appendix 1: Survey

*Survey: Understanding of Islam and Attitudes about Muslims
*The University of Queensland Social Research Centre (UQSRC)
*OZQUEST System
*August 2006
Q99LOC LOCATION

1. Brisbane
2. SE Qld

Hello, my name is [Q0IV] and I work at the University of Queensland Social Research Centre in Brisbane. We are conducting a survey on behalf of researchers at Griffith University to examine people's perceptions about Islam and Muslim people. We are interested in speaking to someone in the household who is 18 years and over. Would that be you?

Are you of the Muslim faith?

Interviewer if respondent states Yes - a Muslim use code 3, if no ask next question

Are you willing to participate in the survey?

Interviewer: If more than one person, ask to speak to the person in the household who is 18 or over and who has had a birthday most recently.

If available, re-introduce yourself or make an appointment to call back."

1. Yes
2. No
3. Respondent is Muslim

IF 2 Q99INTRO ABORT "refused to participate but eligible"
IF 3 Q99INTRO ABORT "respondent is Muslim - out of scope"

Q99INTRO1

"

The survey takes about 10 minutes and participation is voluntary. You can chose not to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time. Your participation is voluntary and the survey has been approved by the Griffith University Ethics Committee. Any information you provide will be kept confidential. "

BLANK

PAUSE

START

Q1 knowledge of islam

"

Q1 How would you rate your own knowledge of the religion, Islam?

INTERVIEWER: _READ OUT RESPONSES_"

1. None at all
2. A little
3. A fair amount
4. A lot

IF 1 Q1 GO Q4

Q2 main teachings islam

"

Q2 What would you say is the main teaching of Islam?

INTERVIEWER: _CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER_

INTERVIEWER: _DO NOT READ OUT RESPONSE OPTIONS AT FIRST_"

1. Worship / Submission/surrender to God/Allah
2. Believe in God/Allah and do good deeds
3. To live a moral/ethical life
4. Same as / similar to other monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity)
5. Five pillars of Islam (belief in God, prayer, charity, fasting, pilgrimage)
6. To follow Muhammad / To follow the Quran
7. Terrorism / violence / War / Killing / Fighting / Conflict
8. Intolerance of others / Hatred
9. Backward / Barbarism
10. Don't know / Unsure
11. Other (Specify Q2A)

IF 5 Q2 GO Q4

GO Q3

Q2A Other question 2

Q3 familiarity with five pillars

"

Q3 Are you familiar with the 'Five Pillars' of Islam?"

1. Yes
2. No
3. Unsure

Q4 interaction

"

Q4 What is the extent of your personal interaction with Muslim people?"

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Occasionally
4. Often
5. Constantly

IF 1 Q4 GO Q6

Q5 context of interaction

"

Q5 What is (was) the context of your personal interaction?

INTERVIEWER: _CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER_

INTERVIEWER: _DO NOT READ OUT RESPONSE OPTIONS AT FIRST, IF RESPONDENT HAS DIFFICULTY CHOOSING A SINGLE RESPONSE, PROMPT WITH WHAT IS YOUR MAIN SOURCE OF THEIR INTERACTION, WHICH IS THE MOST INFLUENTIAL _"

1. Friend
2. Relative
3. Spouse/partner/boyfriend/girlfriend
4. Neighbour
5. Work colleague
6. Customer/Client
7. School/University associate
8. Overseas travel
9. Fellow member of club/association/organisation
10. Someone I met on the street/at the shops/in the park etc.
11. Other (Specify Q5A)

IF 8 Q5 GO Q5AA

GO Q6

Q5A Other question 5

Q5AA Overseas travel

"

Q5A Which country?"

Q6 Muslims in Australian society

"

Q6 Are you personally comfortable with Muslims being part of Australian society? "

1. Yes
2. No
3. Unsure

Q7 Reason question 6

IF 1 Q6

"

Q7 Why is that?

INTERVIEWER: _CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER_

INTERVIEWER: _DO NOT READ OUT RESPONSE OPTIONS AT FIRST_"

ELSE

"

Q7 Why is that?

INTERVIEWER: _CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER_

INTERVIEWER: _DO NOT READ OUT RESPONSE OPTIONS AT FIRST_"

1. Muslims are Just like everyone else
2. Muslims are Productive/contributors to society

3. Muslims are Adding to multiculturalism / cultural diversity of Australia
4. Muslims are Kind / polite / well-mannered
5. Muslims are Strange / have strange ways
6. Muslims are Unproductive / lazy / dole bludgers
7. Muslims are Rude / ill-mannered
8. Muslims are Dirty / unclean
9. Muslims are Fundamentalists
10. Muslims are Misogynistic / mistreat / disrespect / discriminate against women
11. Muslims are Dangerous / Threat / Terrorists / Militants
12. Don't know / Unsure
13. Other (Specify Q7A)

GO Q8

Q7A Other question 7

Q8 Muslims a threat

"

Q8 Do you see Australian Muslims as a threat to the country?"

1. Yes
2. No
3. Unsure

IF 2-3 Q8 GO Q10

Q9 define threat

"

Q9 How would you best define or describe this threat?"

1. Security (in terms of terrorism)
2. Economic (in terms of jobs)
3. Political (in terms of Muslims in the government)
4. Cultural (in terms of Muslim culture being practiced)
5. Demographic (in terms of the growing Muslim population)
6. Don't know / Unsure
7. Other (Specify Q9A)

GO Q10

Q9A Other question 9

Q10 main source of info

SPLIT=2

"

Q10 What is your MAIN source of information about Islam and Muslim people?

INTERVIEWER: _CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER_

INTERVIEWER: _DO NOT READ OUT RESPONSE OPTIONS AT FIRST_

INTERVIEWER AFTER A SHORT WHILE: _FOR EXAMPLE, TV, NEWSPAPER, RADIO_"

1. Television news and current affairs programs
2. Television dramas or sitcoms
3. Newspapers

4. News magazines
5. Other magazine
6. Internet
7. Radio
8. Films / Movies
9. Documentaries
10. Books
11. Teacher / University lecturer
12. Friends / Relatives / Spouse / Partner
13. Work colleague(s)
14. Religious leader (eg. priest, rabbi, minister etc.)
15. Politicians
16. My interaction with Muslims
17. Don't know / Unsure
18. Other and names of specific political leaders (Specify Q10K)

IF 1 Q10 GO Q10A
 IF 2 Q10 GO Q10B
 IF 3 Q10 GO Q10C
 IF 4 Q10 GO Q10D
 IF 5 Q10 GO Q10E
 IF 6 Q10 GO Q10F
 IF 7 Q10 GO Q10G
 IF 8 Q10 GO Q10H
 IF 9 Q10 GO Q10I
 IF 10 Q10 GO Q10J

GO Q11

Q10A Television programs

SPLIT=1

"

Q10A Which Channel?"

1. Seven
2. Nine
3. Ten
4. ABC
5. SBS
6. Sky
7. BBC
8. CNN
9. Other (specify Q10AA)

GO Q14

Q10AA specify question 10a

Q10B Television drama

SPLIT=1

"

Q10B Which drama or sitcom was most influential in this respect?"

GO Q11

Q10C Newspaper

SPLIT=1

"

Q10C Which newspaper?"

1. The Australian
2. The Courier Mail
3. The AGE
4. Sydney Morning Herald
5. Other (Specify Q10CC)

GO Q14

Q10CC Other newspaper

GO Q14

Q10D Newsmagazines

SPLIT=1

"

Q10D Which newsmagazine?"

1. Time
2. Newsweek
3. Bulletin
4. Other (Specify Q10DD)

GO Q11

Q10DD Other newsmagazine

GO Q11

Q10E Other magazine

SPLIT=1

"

Q10E Which magazine?"

GO Q14

Q10F Internet

SPLIT=1

"

Q10F News websites or websites about islam?"

GO Q14

Q10G Radio

SPLIT=1

"

Q10F News bulletins or talkback radio?"

GO Q14

Q10H Movies

SPLIT=1

"

Q10H Which movie(s) was most influential?"

GO Q14

Q10I Documentaries

SPLIT=1

"

Q10I Which Documentary(s) was most influential?"

GO Q14

Q10J Books

SPLIT=1

"

Q10J Which book(s) was most influential?"

GO Q14

Q10K other question 10

Q11 importance of mass media

SPLIT=1

"

Q11 How important for you is the mass media as a source of information about Islam and Muslim people?

INTERVIEWER: _READ OUT RESPONSE OPTIONS_"

1. Not at all
2. A little
3. A fair amount
4. Very

IF 1 Q11 GO Q14

GO Q12

Q12 media source most important

"

Q12 Which media source would you say is your MAIN SOURCE OF information about Islam and Muslims?

INTERVIEWER: _READ OUT OPTIONS_"

1. Television news and current affairs programs
2. Television dramas or sitcoms
3. Newspapers

4. News magazines
5. Other magazine
6. Internet
7. Radio
8. Films / Movies
9. Documentaries
10. Books
11. Don't know / Unsure
12. Other (specify Q12K)

IF 1 Q12 GO Q12A
IF 2 Q12 GO Q12B
IF 3 Q12 GO Q12C
IF 4 Q12 GO Q12D
IF 5 Q12 GO Q12E
IF 6 Q12 GO Q12F
IF 7 Q12 GO Q12G
IF 8 Q12 GO Q12H
IF 9 Q12 GO Q12I
IF 10 Q12 GO Q12J

GO Q13

Q12A Television programs

"

Q12A Which Channel?"

1. Seven
2. Nine
3. Ten
4. ABC
5. SBS
6. Sky
7. BBC
8. CNN
9. Other (Specify)

GO Q13

Q12B Television drama

"

Q12B Which drama or sitcom was most influential in this respect?"

GO Q13

Q12C Newspaper

"

Q12C Which newspaper?"

1. The Australian
2. The Courier Mail
3. The AGE
4. Sydney Morning Herald
5. Other (Specify Q12CC)

GO Q13

Q12CC Other newspaper

GO Q13

Q12D Newsmagazines

"

Q12D Which news magazine?"

1. Time
2. Newsweek
3. Bulletin
4. Other (Specify Q12DD)

GO Q13

Q12DD Other newsmagazine

GO Q13

Q12E Other magazine

"

Q12E Which magazine?"

BLANK

GO Q13

Q12F Internet

"

Q12F News websites or websites about islam?"

BLANK

GO Q13

Q12G Radio

"

Q12G News bulletins or talkback radio?"

BLANK

GO Q13

Q12H Movies

"

Q12H Which movie(s) was most influential?"

BLANK

GO Q13

Q12I Documentaries

"

Q12I Which Documentary(s) was most influential?"

BLANK

GO Q13

Q12J Books

"

Q12J Which book(s) was most influential?"

BLANK

GO Q13

Q12K Other question 12

Q13 political leaders

"

Q13 To what extent do Australian political leaders contribute to your understanding of Islam and Muslim people?"

1. Not at all
2. A little
3. A fair amount
4. A lot

Q14 media portraying Muslims

"

Q14 How would you describe the representation of Islam and Muslims in the media?

INTERVIEWER: DO NOT read out options AT first_

INTERVIEWER: AFTER SOME TIME PROMPT WITH FIRST TEN OPTIONS_"

RND 10

1. Fair
2. Accurate
3. Honest
4. Objective
5. Biased
6. Unfair
7. Inaccurate
8. Dishonest
9. Sensationalist
10. Designed to serve business interests
11. Don't know / Unsure
12. Other (Specify Q14A)
13. Positive
14. Negative

GO Q15

Q14A Other question 14

Q15 Fed government portraying Muslims

"

Q15 How would you describe statements made by the Federal Government about Islam and Muslims?

INTERVIEWER: _DO NOT read out options at first_

INTERVIEWER: _AFTER SOME TIME PROMPT WITH FIRST TEN OPTIONS_"

RND 10

1. Fair
2. Accurate
3. Honest
4. Objective
5. Biased
6. Unfair
7. Inaccurate
8. Dishonest
9. Sensationalist
10. Made to serve political objectives
11. Don't know / Unsure
12. Other (Specify Q15A)
13. Positive
14. Negative

GO Q16

Q15A Other question 15

Q16 Demographics intro

"

Now I would like to ask you a few final questions about yourself"

BLANK

Q17 Gender

"

Q17 Are you..."

1. Male
2. Female

Q18 Age

"

Q18 How old are you?"

1. 16-20
2. 21-25
3. 26-30
4. 31-35
5. 36-40

6. 41-45
7. 46-50
8. 51-55
9. 56-60
10. 61 or over

Q19 Education

"

Q19 What is the highest level of education you have completed?"

1. Primary school
2. Secondary school
3. TAFE/Trade certificate / Diploma
4. Bachelor degree
5. Post Graduate (Post Grad. Diploma, Masters)
6. PhD or Post-Doctoral degree
7. Other (Specify Q19A)

GO Q20

Q19A Other question 19

Q20 Occupation

"

Q20 What is your occupation?"

1. Unemployed
2. Student
3. Sales / retail
4. Tradesperson
5. Business / Self-employed
6. Managerial / Administration
7. Professional
8. Other (Specify Q20A)

GO Q21

Q20A Other question 20

Q21 Household income

"

Q21 Please indicate the category that includes your total household income"

1. Less than \$50,000
2. 50,000 - \$100,000
3. Over \$100,000
4. Unwilling to provide information

Q22 Postcode

"

Q22 What is the postcode of the area you live in?"

NUM

width=4

BLANK

Q23 END

"

Q23 Thank you for giving your time to consider these issues. In case you did not catch my name it is _[Q0IV]_ from the University of Queensland Social Research Centre. My supervisor may call you to check some answers for this interview and may ask you to recall my name."

BLANK

Q0QUO QUOTA

1. 200 Brisbane
2. 300 SE Qld

USE Q0LOC

END