

Iain Lygo paper

Introduction.

Good Morning and Assalam mu' alaikum.

I was invited to speak at this symposium due to a book I self-published in 2004 called "News Overboard: The Tabloid Media, Race Politics, and Islam".

The book is somewhat dated now due to the change in government and mild improvements in certain sections of the media, and a rapidly changing media environment, but it does catalogue one of the darkest periods in Australian politics and media.

Why did I write the book? I stood for the Greens in the Federal election in 2001, still known as the Tampa election.

The polled stunned me for two reasons. The first reason was the ugly racist tactics used by the coalition. The other thing that shocked me about the 2001 election was the success of those tactics.

I spent months trying to work out why such a large proportion of the Australian public fell for the lies told during the campaign.

Six weeks before polling day in 2001, it was painfully obvious to me the government was lying through their teeth. Anyone who got their news from the ABC, SBS or the broadsheets must have come to this same conclusion. It was only months afterwards, when I was studying the media output during the campaign did the penny drop: "A scared electorate had been duped by Howard et al and a thoroughly biased media who cared more about ratings and partisan reporting than truth."

Howard had won over the Hansonites with a stunning display of political lies that pandered to prejudice, and a significant number of voters were fed like chooks by the tabloid media that dropped the ball when it came to their democratic duty.

I am fully convinced that if the tabloid media acted responsibly in 2001 the country would have seen PM Beazley.

The shoddy journalism in 2001 can be categorised into three types.

1. Careless journalism at an individual level. Failure to attribute sources meant lies told by various ministers and the "public service" operatives were reported as fact. The Tampa didn't pick up the Palapa in Indonesian waters. Children were not thrown overboard. international Maritime law was misrepresented and those misrepresentations went unchallenged by large sections of the media. The Media

blackouts around the Tampa were warning signals that were ignored.

2. Mischievous journalism. For example, David Penberthy, who went on to become editor of the Daily Telegraph, wrote an disgraceful article about sympathy logically being abandoned for Muslims. In this article Penberthy linked unrelated local stories (Gang rapes in Sydney's south west), with unrelated national stories (detention centres) and unrelated international issues (September 11). The binding mechanism was religion. Virtually every "Muslim" story ever done by Alan Jones fits this category.

3. Institutional biases. This can be split into two sub sections. Partisan political cheer leading and profit motive. Basically there is no money in reporting harsh conditions in detention centres, but if a riot occurs it's pay-day.

Unprofessional journalism still exists, and some of the key tabloid players in 2001 are still kicking today, but they are becoming increasingly marginalised, and their arguments are becoming increasingly irrational.

For example, Andrew Bolt wrote an incredibly offensive column about The King Khalid Islamic College's poor VCE results being a potential terrorism problem. The school has an excellent academic record but it's VCE results are poor because most of the students do extremely well in the International Baccalaureate academic stream. The article no doubt caused great offence to students and parents who already feel a sense of alienation.

Another commentator who exacerbates feelings of alienation is Alan Jones. He regularly comments about Muslim ghettos. Whenever Muslims try to move out of the "ghettos" you'd think Jones would be happy. But talk back radio rates best in a moral panic so his commentary about Cronulla and the Annagrove prayer hall was utterly predictable. The truly disturbing aspect of Jones' coverage of these matters was violence had already broken out and yet that didn't stop him from "poking the bear".

These "journalists" and I use that term for want of a better one, are now outside the political loop, and will struggle for stories and leaks.

They have also missed the cultural shift in Australia. Splitting the community to increase the ratings may not be such a successful tactic.

Like the previous government, their cheerleaders in the media have lost credibility and both group must now think twice about backing prejudice. The politics and coverage of the Haneef affair was hugely embarrassing for both Jones and Kevin Andrews.

We can expect these "journalists" to play the "poor me" conspiracy theorist line of being swamped by leftist or PC media.

Their relevance is also diminishing as the media becomes increasingly fragmented. The proliferation of the internet has made commercial life very difficult for traditional media.

The world wide web means radio stations are now video news broadcasters, papers now have VOD, and TV stations have web sites with written news.

There is still very powerful media players in traditional medium like talk back radio and news print, but their audiences are often elderly and have entrenched opinions.

The new media culture wars are occurring in cyberspace, and there are both challenges and opportunities for Australian Muslims.

The rise of the web means any random nutter can now broadcast their opinions to the world. Unfortunately there are a lot of nutters out there in cyberspace who have no qualms about making life difficult for Muslims.

This is done by encouraging violence. Other commentators help raise general levels of intolerance in society which makes it difficult for Muslims to fit in, and find jobs and rental properties.

Here are few example of web-based intolerance.

“The media and artists should keep provoking, keep pissing off the Muslims until they just learn to ignore it like everyone else has to. If they can’t stand the heat they should get out of the kitchen – ie - go live in a non-Western country. Free speech is non-negotiable.”

“Every Western newspaper should publish those cartoons,have a page where we send up our own [which we do often] then defy the trouble makers with the the order that any violence is a violation of our freedoms and punishable by deportation. That should do for a start.”

“Before anyone gets on their high horse at me I’ll just say Islam is not a ‘race’- it is a religious ideology that could not be further removed from Western social democratic values if it tried.”

“Oil and water don’t mix.”

“Agree Frank. The 2 cultures do not co-exist very peacefully together and should not be together - period.”

“The riots are being deliberately stirred up and instigated by certain Islamic leaders. That’s why almost without exception they happen on a Friday.”

This type of web-based racism can be categorised into three loose classifications.

1. Hard core conspiracy theorist. For example Stormfront, a neo-nazi site that has a small band of poorly-educated and very angry contributors who are widely dispersed, and blame race on everything.

Individual contributors are all dangerous and have a real propensity for violence. Links between the hard right parties such as Australia First and Stormfront contributors are well documented by the anti-racist group Fight Dem Back.

The good news for Muslims about Stormfront, is most contributors seem to hate Jewish people even more.

These groups rarely meet in public because they are essentially a web-based “organisation” and members don’t come from a common locality. When members do meet in public, problems follow for the far right.

Melbourne based neo-Nazis had a social BBQ in Birrarong Mar about three year’s ago. I was lucky enough to be sitting across the Yarra with my Nikon and a huge telephoto lens. When the results were published on the web, many members of the group left immediately. Other lunar right organisations are hopelessly infiltrated by anti-racist activists, who run a very effective disruption campaign.

These groups flock to “ethnic” hotspots like Camden and Cronulla to recruit members. White Pride Coalition of Australia and Australia First feed on local concerns and then add wild conspiracy theories to support their argument. The radicalisation process towards neo-nazism is exactly the same as the radicalisation process towards Muslim extremism. Alienation, anger, and identity politics all play a crucial role in the move towards violent extremism.

I label another type of web-based racism as “ugly conservatism”. e.g. A Western Heart in Australia, and Little Green Footballs that attracts a mainly USA-based readership. This type of site has limited readership and entries involve subjects other than race, but ethnic stories do generate the most traffic. Contributors are “virtual patriots”. That is, these people rarely contribute to the country, but they claim patriot status merely by slugging minorities on the web.

The third group I call “mainstream ugly conservatism”. For example the Andrew Bolt and Pier Akerman blogs. These sites have very high number of users. They are moderated but loosely, and blatantly racist material still regularly gets through.

There are no defined boundaries in these classifications, but there is a strong crossover of ideas and arguments.

Such as:

*there should be a moratorium on Muslim immigration.

*dual citizenship with Lebanon is un-Australian (never mind it is New Zealanders and Europeans most like to retain their citizenship from country of origin)

* If there is a war who side will these people be on?

* They're here to undermine our way of life?

* Islam is a barbaric religion.

Posters on ugly mainstream sites don't have any solutions to their perceived problems. Solving problems isn't an issue when it comes to moral panics. At least the Stormfronters offer solutions! Sure they are violent solutions such as a HORAWA (Holy Race War), but at least the neo-nazis have an answer to their problems.

The crossover of ideas sees Bolt quoted on Stormfront and then lunar right theories are added. There is a dangerous crossover of ideas but Bolt and other mainstream ugly conservative express these ideas more carefully whereas the neo-nazi groups aren't so shy about their racism.

Mainstream ugly conservatism is very evident in story feedback sections in tabloid papers/radio web sites. Editors know the hot-button issues are race based, and the quickest way to increase site traffic is to add a comments section to a "Muslim" story.

"To me, that (Haneefs' supposed support of his cousins actions) deserves the death penalty. Geoff Cass, Tewanin. It's probably good Mr Cass isn't in charge of our judicial system otherwise Dr Haneef would be pushing up daisies by now.

"Well, what next? Why don't we just issue an invitation to Osama Bin Laden through Hicks and bring the lot over here to mess up what's left of Australia?"2GB

The new media is also moving so quickly, that traditional web sites may be obsolete within years. Video phones with VOD may be as common as text messaging within years. Anyone who received the racist "alternative apology" to the stolen generation on their phones or in their inboxes will recognise the real dangers of new media, now and in the future.

While it is very easy to find ugly racism on the web we must move on and find some solutions to racism in the media.

A FAMSU representative argued Muslims should adopt a journalist to educate them.

Better still become one yourself. Waleed Aly is a fabulous writer who provides a much needed moderate voice when writing on issues involving Muslims. The media in Australia is Anglo-Saxon dominated and wider diversity would mean it better represented the Australian people.

The modern media also allows Muslims and other minorities to express opinions not usually heard on mainstream media.

For example a You Tube video titled, "I am a muslim" was made by a young man called Mohammed in New Jersey. This 5 minute film uses comedy brilliantly and has had 1.7 million views. It's only 5 months old.

Verity Peterson an Australian Muslim has launched a video with 123,000 hits.

There are legal means of combating racism on web.

Victoria's racial and religious vilification laws may well apply to other states and territories in Australia.

The Joseph Gutnick case in which he successfully sued Dow Jones after it published a defamatory article on the web is a very interesting precedent on this matter. The judges ruled the defamation occurred where the material was downloaded rather than where it was uploaded. In other words vilification occurs in Victoria even if it is uploaded in Cairns, Toowoomba, or Perth.

Threats of violence on a web site can easily be traced because whenever someone makes a post they leave a digital footprint. Traditional criminal laws may play a part in limiting web-based racism.

With the change of government the Australian Communications and Media Authority may actually get some teeth when it comes to combating racist material. ACMA has regularly found that 2GB has breached guidelines in regards to vilification. With the inevitable public service purge of right wing cultural warriors, next time 2GB gets done for vilification, sanctions may be substantial.

We may also see racism in the media reduce because media organisation must now reflect the new political and social reality. If media companies don't adjust, they risk losing credibility and profits. We've already seen some stunning back flips in editorial positions. e.g. 11 years of vehement opposition to an apology in the Murdoch papers have gone out the window since Rudd's election. We have also seen the Murdoch media adopt an editorial position on climate change that was diametrically opposite to their previous position.

I am convinced that if Rudd takes a lead on multiculturalism, and it is celebrated by the majority of the population, you will see the tabloids soften their attitude to protect their profit and influence.

We may even already be in a position where more extreme opinions about Muslims are going to turn readers and audiences away from papers and radio.

While the media solutions seems daunting, expensive, and time-consuming, I personally believe the best way to combat racism and Islamophobia in Australia is through non-media solutions.

Before I came to this forum I told some members of my cricket club about the event. Their responses were filled with ill-inform remarks about Muslims and Islam in general.

I asked my fellow cricketers how many of them had actually met a Muslim. The response was, "None. none, and none".

It was very clear that these guys had received all of their information about Muslims through the media and maybe to a lesser extent through second hand information through friends.

My challenge to Muslims is to get out and meet the great unwashed!

What better way to do this than participating in Australia's other great religion, organised sport.

I have a fantasy about a Muslim opening the batting for Australia against England. There's 80,000 people at the M.C.G. watching the first day of the boxing day test. The bowler is at the end of his run and the crowd starts to cheer. And it's not the "poms" the crowd will be cheering for.

Meet your neighbours by inviting them over for a halal BBQ.

Join a community club such as a Surf Life Saving Club or Rotary. I can actually picture a Muslim rescuing an "Aussie" and the "Aussie" comes to the conclusion that Muslims aren't that bad after all.

Get involved at your kid's school. Read at the local library.

This will break down barriers established by the old tabloid media.