

Jihad Sheilas or Media Martyrs?
Muslim Women & the Australian Mediaⁱ

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They have invented a stereotype of blind, obedient colourless women, covered from head to toe in grey, which has nothing to do with real life. They never represent the diversity of Muslim women – our origins, professions, education, opinions, or clothes. Our voices are never heard themselves, just people speaking on our behalf, often typifying us as victims of brutal men. If we don't fit the stereotype (and nearly no-one does) then our views are dismissed as being atypical. The image [the media] presents of Muslim women is just nothing like me or any of the Muslim women I know. It is a fantasy of Western ignorance, which is reinforced every time it is in the press. (W11)ⁱⁱ

Abstract

Muslim women are both highly visible members of one of the most marginalised groups in Western society and the most vulnerable to vilification and media stereotyping, often suffering the 'triple-whammy' effect of sexism, racism and religious bigotry. Ubiquitously portrayed as veiled, they are concurrently represented as oppressed and radical non-conformists; as threatened and threatening; as passive sex-slaves and exotic, erotic beings. Symbolised generically by the distinctive religious clothing some choose to wear, Muslim women of all cultures have become the most recognisable targets of racism on the streets. Yet at the same time they are almost invisible and voiceless in news coverage.

Negative stereotyping and reactionary reporting have historically typified Western media coverage of Islam and Muslims, and Muslim women are no exception. Said's theory of Orientalism,ⁱⁱⁱ which contends that the Muslim world and its inhabitants are considered backward, barbaric and outsiders

to Western society, is most notable in the media's coverage of Muslim women. The traditional religious dress adopted by some Muslim women has provided powerful media discourses which reinforce these stereotypes – particularly the notions of oppression, threat and alienation.

This paper examines the impact of problematic Australian media coverage of Muslim women as perceived by Muslim women themselves. Drawing on qualitative interviews, focus groups and surveys, it reveals the effect of media coverage of Muslim women on their lived experience, identity formation and their attitudes to mainstream journalism. In the process, it gives voice to their demands for changes in reporting practice. The women describe their fear of media-induced vilification; their loathing of media stereotyping and reductionism; their suspicion of mainstream journalism and reporters; their disinclination to engage with news media and their resort to alternative information sources. They collectively highlight debates around traditional Islamic dress – particularly veiling – as critical to their experiences as Muslim women consumers of news.

Depictions of Muslim Women in the News: The literature

In the portrayal of Muslim women internationally, attention is frequently focused on the way they dress, with their clothing seen as a symbol of their threatening, alien status: 'images of Islamic dress are increasingly used in the media as visual shorthand for dangerous extremism, and...Muslims all over Europe are suffering from the consequences of such associations'.^{iv}

Alison Donnell argues that the September 11 terrorist attacks supplanted media representations of 'veiling' as 'an object of mystique, exoticism and eroticism' with a 'xenophobic, more specifically Islamophobic, gaze through which the veil, or headscarf, is seen as a highly visible sign of a despised difference'.^v But MacMaster and Lewis identified this trend three years before the attacks,

noting the juxtaposition of representations of Muslim women as both oppressed and threatening.^{vi} Canadian researchers made similar observations in the early 1990s – ‘there’s a journalistic jihad afoot in Canada’^{vii} — arguing that the Canadian media’s focus on women as oppressed figures in far-off lands served to downplay the oppression of all women in Canada. They suggest the focus on the hijab,^{viii} for example, stems from the development of a ‘new Cold War’ in which Islamic fundamentalism replaced communism as a rallying point for opponents of Western society.

However, the September 11 attacks did expose Muslim women to greater media attention as journalists sought alternative perspectives on the very newsworthy theme of Islam. But according to Macdonald, ‘the opportunity this offered for diversity of opinion was repeatedly undermined by the continuing obsession with veiling/unveiling’.^{ix} She argues that the veil was reconstructed as both ‘a form of resistance to Western ideology and secularism...[and] as evidence of Muslim women’s agency and freedom of choice...by the media’

The act of Muslim women unveiling and conforming to Western models of post-feminist beauty was also manipulated by the media as a potent, colonial symbol of ‘liberation’ and ‘rescue’ in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Shahira Fahmy’s content analysis of the Associated Press photo archive, covering the periods immediately before and after the ‘liberation’ of Kabul, found the media excessively focused on the rate of unveiling to the detriment of reportage on underlying problems surrounding women’s employment, education and abuse.^x

Similarly, the Australian media’s coverage of Muslims is overwhelmingly negative in tone, prone to stereotyping while frequently conflating Islam and crime, both on television^{xi} and in print.^{xii} In public radio current affairs programming, coverage has been more nuanced but it has been driven

overwhelmingly by responses to terrorism, vilification and Right Wing political campaigns to “ban the burqa”^{xiii}.

However Muslim women are virtually invisible in mainstream Australian news. And when they are reported they are almost exclusively cast as the outsider – alien to Australian culture and social experience with an almost inescapable requirement to speak, when they *are* asked, about veiling. Aly and Walker link the Australian media obsession with veiling to the discourses of national security and social cohesion: ‘Indeed, the veil has come to represent Islam itself and the “veiled threat” has become code for the wider threat of an Islamic presence in Australia drawing explicitly on fears that Australian cultural values might collapse’.^{xiv}

Australian Muslim feminist academic and writer, Shakira Hussein, has been the victim of such veil-obsessed media stereotyping herself:

The woman in hijab also represents the ‘money-shot’, the vital ingredient, for Islam-related stories. While no Muslim has ever explicitly suggested that I should immediately don a hijab, several journalists and editors in search of the ‘hijabi money-shot’ have done so, and on one occasion even suggested that I veil my computer as a novelty shot.^{xv}

As the Islamic Women’s Welfare Council of Victoria declares:

The absence of Muslim women in the coverage of Islam and Muslims is as striking as it is unjust. The capacity and role of Muslim women exceeds comments on the hijab or issues of gender oppression. It is crucial that women’s expertise be recognised in all matters relating

to Islam and their contribution should be sought beyond the ‘women’s perspective’ approach. Until the role of women is acknowledged, it will not be possible to understand Muslims or Islam.^{xvi}

But Hussein says Muslim women have effectively been silenced by what she describes as the ‘double-bind effect’ of media coverage that vilifies Muslim men, as racists, terrorists and religious fanatics. This effect, she says, catches women between patriarchy and racism:

[It] robs us of the space we need to speak out. Rather than providing a platform from which Muslim women can express their frustrations, fears and hopes for the future, a large proportion of the media coverage has had a silencing effect on Muslim women... Muslim women know that any legitimate concerns that they have about gender norms within their communities will be folded into a sensationalist media tirade designed to prove that Islam is a primitive and misogynist religion. Rather than contribute to this, many women remain silent or try to express their concerns internally.^{xvii}

Methodology

The research for this paper takes the form of qualitative engagement with Muslim women media consumers and journalists. The perspectives of twenty Australian Muslim women from a variety of cultural backgrounds and age groups are canvassed here. The women were participants in interviews, surveys and focus groups which targeted Muslim women’s networks and community organisations in the Australian states of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. They all identified their religion as influential in their life but expressed varying degrees of adherence. They also all described themselves as regular consumers of mainstream news (print, TV

and radio) and approximately half identified alternative media (predominantly online and community radio) as other media sources they relied upon. Two of the participants were professional journalists and another volunteered for a community media outlet. The Muslim women quoted in this paper will be identified as W1-W18. The Muslim women journalists will be marked as J1-J2.

In addition, a qualitative interview was conducted with Paul Cutler, the head of News and Current Affairs at the national multicultural broadcaster, SBS, to provide professional context for the analysis of the Muslim women's perspectives.

Through the Eyes of Muslim Women - What is wrong with Australian media coverage?

Nineteen out of the 20 participants in this research were scathing in their criticism of the mainstream news media's reporting of Muslim women. They cited rampant stereotyping as the biggest problem, highlighting the clichéd representations of Muslim women as veiled; victims of misogyny and an oppressive religion; subject to polygamous marriages; uneducated; alien; sub-human; unassertive; foreign; fundamentalist; 'un-Australian'; distant and unapproachable as major cause for concern.

Yeah, I would say [we're] represented as having no voice; no say in the wider community; as being oppressed; as being victimised ... you know they're victims of their own community, of their own religion so to speak. (W1)

[The coverage is] absolutely appalling. Inaccurate, scare-mongering, stereotyping. When it comes to women it's also stupid and docile. [It implies] Muslim women dress the same, are

all obedient wives to difficult men; are uneducated; do not have professional skills; are oppressed – that our religion oppresses us and yet we mindlessly follow it. (W11)

[We're shown as] essentially 'un-Australian' and have a harder time 'integrating'; forced to wear a headscarf by [our] male relatives, [as] unapproachable and exclusionists, [supporters of] terrorism. ...A significant amount of [coverage] is sensationalist, politicised, Orientalist. (W13)

[Stereotypes include] that you are forced to wear hijab; that all Muslim men want [or have] multiple wives; that female genital mutilation is an Islamic practice; that women are forced into marriage by Islam; that honour killing is Islamic; that wife beating is Islamic. (W8)

Even the journalists among the participants identified negative media stereotyping as a significant problem:

All Muslims [are seen as] terrorists [who] carry the same view...Muslim women often appear in the media as victims of their religion. Never do we hear women being the voice of authority for the religion. However, when the media wants a comment from 'a Muslim', they always look to men. It also seems that the media uses only women who choose to wear a hijab, 'visual Muslims'. Although stories about Islamic women are not common, those which (sic) wear a hijab are often used in overlay when referring to people who are 'different' or diversity. (J2)

This journalist went on to say that, in her experience, Muslims only appear in the mainstream news when they feature in stories about Islam being in conflict with Australian norms and values,

Such as requests for polygamous marriage or a senior member of a Muslim community saying something controversial. Another observation is that the media tends to focus on ... 'Middle Eastern' Muslims in Australia, and tends to ignore people from other backgrounds that (sic) may also practice the religion. (J2)

But another Muslim woman journalist surveyed drew distinctions between public and commercial stations: 'I think there is a real difference between public broadcasters like SBS or the ABC, and commercial networks where Muslims and Muslim women are seen as still very foreign'. (J1)

This was also a view expressed by SBS News and Current Affairs Director, Paul Cutler, who identified the stereotype of subservience as a problem but sought to distinguish the multicultural broadcaster as a model of 'better practice' in the reporting of Muslim women. However, even SBS stands accused of sensationalising and stereotyping Muslim women by one of the Muslim women I interviewed. She participated in an episode of Insight (www.sbs.com.au/insight) – a flagship SBS TV current affairs programme - which addressed issues confronting second generation immigrants and she claimed 'bad editing' resulted in the suppression of moderate voices like her own. Her message in the discussion was on the importance of learning English as a second language as a form of self-empowerment: 'I felt that that wasn't what they were going for. They were going for a bigger, kind of more sensationalised picture'.(W1) In her view, the edited programme focused on the 'predictable' themes of arranged marriages and the need to counter extremism.

Beyond complaints of stereotyping, the Muslim women involved in this research also lamented the media's conflation of culture and religion and the 'reductionist' approach to coverage, describing it

variously as 'racist'; 'rubbish'; 'opportunistic'; 'negative'; 'willfully uninformed'; 'stupid' and 'docile'.

Only one of the women, a newly arrived Afghani migrant who had limited experience of Australian mainstream media consumption, viewed the coverage as largely positive:

I actually don't think that there is much about Muslims in Australia in the news. But whatever of it I have seen, it seems positive...for example the most memorable representation I have seen of a Muslim woman is the one of the lady who had opened a school in Sydney and how dedicated she was. (W14)

While several other women highlighted examples of favourable stories by way of contrast to the negative ones that aroused their ire, a number also lamented the deployment of positive stereotypes - Muslim women as successful business operators or sports people, for example - because of the reductionist, two-dimensional nature of the coverage.

Overall, coverage of Muslims is marked by a general negativity and hostility but also a significant degree of superficiality. This combination leads to either stereotypical, negative portrayals of Muslims as angry, violent and disruptive citizens (local and/or global), or trite portrayals of Muslims as 'wonderful additions to the colourful multicultural society we live in'. Exceedingly few portrayals present a nuanced or complex representation which would more accurately reflect Muslims and our communities. For women, rather than being specifically portrayed as violent and angry, the stereotypes that are deployed rely on understandings of Muslim women as victims and unnatural women. (W5)

It is also likely that the women are reacting cautiously to positive stories because they recognise that they are presented as newsworthy on the basis of being ‘exceptions’ to the norm.

Media Effects

While the media cannot be held solely responsible for the construction of identity, nor blamed entirely for societal attitudes towards minority races, cultures and religions, they play a significant role by providing ‘the lens through which reality is perceived’.^{xviii} And, according to Anne Aly’s research on Muslims’ responses to the reporting of terrorism in Australia, Muslims tend to subscribe to the ‘media as propaganda’ model of media effects, placing significant emphasis on the power of news to influence community attitudes towards them:

The media is seen as a complicit and crucial actor in this conspiracy, to destroy Islam. It performs this role through the conflation of Islam with terrorism and the perpetuation of an underlying message that “terrorism is a Muslim tool” and “Australians need to be afraid of Muslims”.^{xix}

This was also the lens through which the Australian media was viewed by the women featured in my research. One of the respondents, a journalist, assessed Australian public opinion on Muslims as being largely a product of problematic media coverage:

For example, I was once asked by a school friend if I ‘hated everyone in Australia, and wanted to blow up the school’. After explaining to this person that not all people had extreme views about their religion, she said that she did not know because she had never

really met a Muslim and I had changed her perspective... her views about Muslims [came] purely from the media. (J2)

Two of the women participating in my research directly related their fear of reprisal from non-Muslim Australians to negative coverage of Muslim women: 'I was abused on 1 February 2006 when I went out for a walk'.(W13) 'You don't know how informed the viewers are. Sometimes I feel in danger because of the bad TV... that's where they get their information'.(W3) Aly's research also identified the link between 'biased' media coverage and public assaults of Muslim women on the streets in the aftermath of September 11.^{xx}

The women who participated in my research expressed the view that positive stories with the potential to counter the negative ones were largely out of the reach of those prone to vilifying Muslims. In other words, the journalists who were reporting in a manner that challenged stereotypes were 'preaching to the converted': 'Channels 2 [ABC] and SBS have in the past had some good stories, BUT the people who watch these channels are only people with broad minds, your mainstream community does not watch these channels!!!!!!'(W10)

But one respondent highlighted what she identified a problem larger than this primary effect of negative media which, she acknowledged, inflames anti-Muslim sentiment:

I think that the 'secondary' effect — the way that it leads Muslim communities to close down and creates a pressure for silence — is becoming the greater problem. And the negative media coverage is empowering the most regressive and misogynist elements in Muslim communities — Muslims are so suspicious of media that negative media coverage

confers credibility. I know it sounds counter intuitive to say that media power is overestimated by Muslims — obviously, media matters. But I think that we are conferring power on bullshit media by exaggerating its influence and the extent to which it reflects public opinion. (W6)

Impact on Construction of Muslim Women's Identities

The women featured in this research also highlighted the impact of problematic media coverage on their own identities as citizens, Muslims, Australians and women.

It makes me feel like I have misconceptions to break, like I have to prove something, when I don't want to. I just want to be me, and not carry around a stereotype and justify who I am. I feel like I am being categorised and my individuality is stripped away from me. (W13)

It makes me angry to be portrayed in these ways. But more generally, I think these portrayals are unhelpful to Muslim women because it creates a narrow frame through which we are viewed. This narrow frame restricts us and when we make choices outside this frame it makes us seem 'unusual'. (W5)

[The coverage is] very distressing. It makes me feel that my Muslim-ness is somehow separate from my Australian-ness. It makes me afraid to show my Muslim identity publicly. [I] absolutely feel vilified/discriminated against. (W11)

I also feel that myself, as a very moderate Muslim, do not exist in the media. (J2)

These women tended either to have their media-imposed identity as ‘victim’ — perpetually defined through religion — reinforced through news consumption or, recognising the sense of powerlessness imbued through such engagement, in an act of self-empowerment, they reported turning their backs on the mainstream media — out of a sense of exhaustion or as a means of developing alternative, individual identities.

...I just want to turn my back because it is so confronting. That is sad, and just not right.

(W18)

I used to get furious when I read articles that completely misrepresented... Muslim women and our potential.

But now I have come to...learn to live with it. Which is probably not very positive because sometimes you are de-motivated to contribute. (W1)

The Way Forward

Elsewhere, in response to evidence of negative, shallow and stereotypical news coverage of Muslim women, I have proposed a better practice model of established reporting methods, arguing that journalists have a social responsibility to avoid the sort of skewed coverage that contributes to the growth of xenophobia, racism and bigotry which, in turn, have the potential to morph into violence against the perceived threat.^{xxi} The proposal involves a commitment to best practice reporting – ethical, accurate and fair – and enterprising, creative journalism, which values news of consequence above news of conflict, to produce ‘a greater resonance between industry news values and individual values’^{xxii} in combination with the exploration of alternative models of reporting, such as peace and advocacy journalism. Such a comprehensive approach could constitute a revised model of journalism which has the potential to enhance fair and balanced coverage of minorities, including Muslim women.

Deepening Coverage

So, what do the Muslim women participating in this research think needs to change in terms of journalistic practice in an effort to combat negative and stereotypical reporting? They want editors, particularly those in the commercial media who are perceived to resort to tabloidisation as a means of boosting sales and ratings, to dig deeper on stories – to go beyond superficial coverage in an effort to access ‘truth’.

If they actually go deeply into the topic then that’s where it’s possible for them to explain misconceptions; to correct misconceptions. (W3)

The TV news, especially on the commercial stations, is only interested in beating up community hostility and creating a story. It has no interest in reporting accurately, on any topic, let alone Muslim women. (W11)

News workers need to be encouraged to work outside the constraints of their profession [which they often use to justify the reliance on quick stereotypes and tropes] and to put into practice the ideals many of them profess to hold - inclusivity, tolerance, a belief in multiculturalism, an understanding of the complexities of the world. In my dealings with news workers, many of them recognise that the media industry does not accurately portray Muslim communities and Islam but that this is not a result of ignorance or malice but the conformance to stringent news production processes which do not allow space for complexities to be explored. (W5)

SBS, which has a charter obligation to reflect diversity, has adopted a deliberate strategy to achieve the deepening of journalistic practice in recognition of the power of stories that peel back the layers to challenge stereotypes and counteract prejudice. As part of SBS' transition to an hour-long news bulletin, featuring an increase in locally-produced content, the Director of News and Current Affairs, Paul Cutler, has prioritised what he calls 'distinctive reporting' or 'discretionary stories' sourced outside the Australian mainstream.

...I...said we should use our news hour to try and value human achievement and human nature...we're getting more multicultural stories on TV now...distinctive, discretionary stories we're doing...much more so than our competitors.^{xxiii}

Cutler argues that in the four years he has overseen SBS News and Current Affairs, there has been a distinct improvement in coverage of Muslims and Islam, citing an increase in stories framed outside the conflict/confrontation convention. He says such reportage is critical if an attempt is to be made to counter narrow and shallow representation of Muslim women.

It's crucial. And the sad thing is, although we're not doing it as often or to the level we'd like, we're one of the few mass media outlets actually doing that. Most of them, even the ABC, will do it on a knee jerk basis. Tension in a small community, you know, immigrant cars torched last night, let's go and get the police talking. We hope we can scratch beneath that surface. And the day after the smoke has cleared and the glass has been swept away, SBS will still be there. That is a barometer, you know.^{xxiv}

Cutler pointed to a particular story he assigned in the aftermath of conflict between Aborigines and Somali refugees in northern NSW, as evidence of 'better practice' in the coverage of such issues.

He sent a reporter and a crew into the region, after tensions died down, on a mission to investigate community responses and recovery from the conflict. The story, which represented a costly investment of a reporter and crew on the ground in the community for 2-3 days, revealed a positive community response and focused on local employment programmes and cultural bridge-building efforts.

Changing Practices

Some of the Muslim women featured in this research called for an overhaul of the language used in reporting Muslims generally, citing misused and misconstrued terms like ‘jihad’ and ‘extremism’. Others observed the need for a broadening of perspectives via news sources – expanding contacts beyond official spokespeople – and in the application of imagery: ‘They only show street scenes shot in Lakemba (a Sydney suburb with a Lebanese-Muslim profile) of women wearing clothes that they consider stereotypical. There are never views or opinions of normal Muslim women’.(W11)

One of the Muslim women journalists interviewed, identified the need to localise news – to undertake community reporting of Muslim women – as a response to international stories dominated by terrorism. But another respondent lamented the sheer weight of coverage of Muslims and Islam overall and pointed to the dangers of procuring a ‘local’ angle on international stories:

...the amount of coverage is out of proportion to the size of the Australian Muslim population — every Muslim in the country must have been interviewed at some stage. The sheer intensity of the coverage is a problem in itself, regardless of whether it is positive or negative, because it creates a sense of crisis. Every time there is an international story involving Islam, the Australian coverage augments the story with a ‘local angle’ (W6)

SBS' Paul Cutler acknowledges the potential risks of the 'let's localise it' news convention but he argues that such stories generate the desire to 'scratch below the surface':

[In] the post 9/11 environment, in the Muslim community where every Muslim is a terrorist routine, well the only way to dispel that is to do some more intensive journalism to prove that's not correct. And I can assure you, we've been doing that. ^{xxv}

A number of the women surveyed also pointed to the need to 'normalise' Muslim women in society 'as part of the greater Australian identity rather than outside of it' (W13) by including them in stories as sources/commentators on issues unconnected to Islam:

I think the media should not only be reporting on Muslims, and Muslim women, only when there is something controversial or to point out that some aspects of the religion may be unusual. Muslims should be included in the mainstream media as a normal part of Australian society, and not just an exception. This adds to Muslims being marginalised. Muslims have other aspects to their lives, and are involved in other groups and areas of society. The media would not make a point of mentioning that their talent was Catholic. (J2)

Other women highlighted the need for journalists to prioritise their roles as 'informer' and 'educator', to take an activist role, to help overcome misconceptions 'instead of perpetuating myths and hatred' (W11) through 'reasonable' and 'rational' reporting. One Muslim woman journalist said it was also incumbent upon reporters to point out to audiences when extreme views were included in stories that these were not necessarily representative of the views of all, or even most, Muslims.

The concept of ‘truth’ in reporting and the problem of single-source stories were also raised and approaches akin to advocacy journalism, such as a deliberate strategy to report positive stories and take a strong editorial line in defence of Muslim women, were proposed as possible strategies for improving coverage by some of the Muslim women surveyed. But one woman fingered editorialisation as the source of the problem: ‘Mainly that they look for the negative, usually cite only one example, and make no effort to check their facts. I find it is mostly opinion-piece writers who do this, rather than reporters’.(W8)

When asked, in response to their reluctance to be interviewed by mainstream journalists, how reporters could better put them at ease, many of the women identified a commitment to report fairly, openly discuss the angle to be adopted for the story and to outline the expectations the reporter had of them as interviewees, as important. But, problematically, there was a recurrent request to have access to questions before the interview and the right to view the report prior to publication/broadcast. This approach is problematic because it is generally considered bad journalistic practice to ‘flag your punches’ – that is, to reveal your questions ahead of an interview – as to do so would potentially allow dishonest interviewees to fabricate responses. It also tends to result in stilted, unnatural and rehearsed-sounding answers which do not satisfy broadcast-production requirements for engaging and spontaneous responses. Nevertheless, there is perhaps room for adjustment in reporting practice in certain circumstances, if significant barriers that inhibit fair representation, through access to alternative voices, are to be overcome.

However, one woman said she was beyond thinking about how to improve media coverage of Muslim women:

Because I don't think that much improvement will happen until the international political climate changes. Journos don't write crap stories about Islam because they don't know any better — they write crap stories about Islam because there is a market for them. So rather than thinking about improvements I would like to see in media, I'm thinking more about ways to make Muslim communities more resilient to such media coverage. (W6)

Barriers to change

There is certainly room for improvement in journalistic practices as applied to coverage of Muslim women, but what are the barriers to such change? On the one hand, there is the cost in time and resources associated with both longer-form reporting and the type of nuanced 'distinctive' journalism identified by SBS' Paul Cutler. There is also the aforementioned deadline pressure that drives reliance on tried and tested sources, and the profile of most mainstream Australian newsrooms is white and middle class, meaning their reporters are largely disconnected from broader social-cultural experiences. On the other hand, within Muslim communities, there is a lack of awareness around news production realities as acknowledged by one of the Muslim journalists surveyed: 'sometimes people are unaware of the urgency of radio news deadlines'.(J1) The Muslim women featured in this research also demonstrated (understandable) suspicion and hostility towards the media and noted the withdrawal of some individuals and representative groups from contact with the media in response.

Underlying such resistance is a general distrust of journalists among Muslim women. For example, 'I think I'd be pretty naïve to trust them...however pleasant and "trustworthy" they seemed beforehand'.(W8) And this: 'Reporters either are not honest or are very superficial and

ignorant'.(W9) The same woman said it would be pointless for her to speak to a journalist on 'Muslim' issues:

I won't try because they won't or don't want to understand, and whatever I said, there is a risk to be misquoted or being taken out of context. So I prefer to remain silent, and I think everyone should be unless they are absolutely 100 percent sure that their words will not be abused. (W9)

Such defensiveness may be a product of the 'once bitten, twice shy' effect heightened by negative post-9/11 news-framing, according to Paul Cutler.

...any publicity deemed to be negative can cause a particular group to basically fold up their tents and take a really negative view of the media. But I think these groups have also found they need better communications specialists to help them...deal with the media and public.

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That said, Cutler says he has had no approaches from Muslim women's groups or representatives seeking to engage on these issues. Concerns have been raised about reporting headscarves, for example, but he says such issues have been brought to his attention by Muslim men.

Significantly, all but one of the Muslim women whose only direct experiences with the media were positive, still expressed extreme caution when asked whether they'd be prepared to be interviewed by mainstream journalists.

Professional Education and Targeted Employment

There is much debate about what BBC documentarian, Mukti Jain Campion, describes as ‘colour by numbers’ journalism hiring practices.^{xxvii} But, Paul Cutler maintains that employing journalists from minorities is an important way of addressing problematic reporting of those groups. SBS has a cadetship programme that targets aspiring journalists from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and, according to Cutler, Muslim women are in ‘hot demand’. But one of the women interviewed for this research highlighted the need for Muslim women to be employed outside SBS: ‘I want to see more Muslim journalists being given opportunities, especially on television, and not just on SBS but on more mainstream commercial channels where you don’t see many Muslim women, who wear a headscarf or otherwise’. (W13)

Embedding ‘cultural competency’ training into journalism education was highlighted as desirable by many of the Muslim women respondents. One of the Muslim journalists also pointed to the need for the inclusion of guidelines and handbooks pertinent to reporting Muslim women in newsroom ‘bibles’. But even at SBS, the approach is still largely about ‘on-the-job’ skills development. Cutler said: ‘When it comes to (camera) crews, crusty old blokes in jeans with a cigarette doing clichéd representation of street scenes, those things have changed...it starts here but it doesn’t come down to a hand book...it’s learned on the job’. But he concedes there’s still ‘a long way to go in Australia.’

Crossing Barriers

A very obvious but little enacted strategy for penetrating the barriers that separate reporters from minorities and inhibit culturally competent reporting of them, is meaningful interaction between the two groups. Human wisdom dictates that it is much harder to vilify and misrepresent people with whom you’ve had contact, or to whom you owe some responsibility. In the context of journalism,

this approach to social cohesion could manifest as public or citizen journalism projects within Muslim communities; the ‘embedding’ of professional reporters within Muslim communities or through workshops which bring the groups together for mutual education. Evidence of the potential for such interactions can be found in the experiences of one of the Muslim women interviewed as part of this research. She is a ‘hijabi’ and teaches swimming to children in a Sydney suburb she identified as ‘largely Anglo’. She described the curiosity bordering on suspicion that some of the parents initially displayed towards her and how that dissipated once she began interacting with them:

It’s all about building rapport, really. They just learn that you are normal. They learn that you are a human being like them and that you are here to teach their kids how to swim. And they start to receive you much more positively. So I’ve learned to understand that it’s about curiosity really. Really they haven’t had any contact with Muslims. So now I start to apply that to journalists as well. I think O.K. maybe they have never met a Muslim in their lives. If there is more of a one-on-one interaction they get a lot more deeper and insightful knowledge of a person’s attitudes. (W1)

The other approach for barrier-surmounting offered by the Muslim women consulted for this research was engagement with community and local media (as distinct from mainstream and metropolitan media), with the view being expressed that they were better able to subvert stereotypes and obtain fairer representation within smaller, locally-based publications or community radio—both as a vehicle for self-representation and as a bridge to the mainstream media:

Having the Muslim community radio and publishing things from Muslims helps to spread the word that these are Australian Muslims...and they have thoughts and views and maybe journos will see that and come and ask for interviews. That's happening. (W3)

Some of the women interviewed also pointed to websites produced by Muslims as more trustworthy sources of news and forums they feel comfortable participating in. Further, the emergence of Social Media platforms like Facebook and Twitter offers potential for subverting damaging media control of the image of Muslim women through self-representation and engagement. The capacity for these to connect globally, in real time, across physical, cultural and religious boundaries is worth exploring by Muslim women as they seek to break down mainstream media stereotyping. At the same time, such platforms may act as a vehicle for the concept of encounter-enhanced reporting outlined above. And, they clearly provide a new source of potential contacts and sources outside organisational structures and official spokespeople for professional journalists.

Conclusion

Muslim women are under-represented in the media: both as practitioners and as sources. But they are over-represented as symbols of Islam connected to terrorism, crime, veiling and oppression. And, when they do appear in the media, with the privilege of voice, they're almost always expected to either defend the men in their communities or justify their decision to wear traditional Islamic clothing. As the research canvassed in this paper demonstrates, many Muslim women feel alienated by and/or disdainful towards the media. Ninety-five percent of the participants were scathing in their criticism of the mainstream news media's reporting of Muslim women. They cited rampant stereotyping as the biggest problem, highlighting the clichéd representations of women as veiled; victims of misogyny and an oppressive religion; subject to polygamous marriages; uneducated;

alien; sub-human; unassertive; foreign; fundamentalist; ‘un-Australian’; distant and unapproachable as significant cause for concern. The journalists among the participants also complained about rampant stereotyping and many respondents lamented the media’s conflation of culture and religion and the ‘reductionist’ approach to coverage, describing it variously as ‘racist’; ‘rubbish’; ‘opportunistic’; ‘negative’; ‘willfully uninformed’; ‘stupid’ and ‘docile’. Another issue highlighted was the secondary effect of such coverage, described as a silencing impact, which caused Muslim women to feel bound to defend misogynistic men against negative reportage.

These women’s concerns reflect the problems inherent in Western models of journalism such as cultural elitism, the absence of Muslim women in newsrooms, as well as shallow approaches to story-telling and the conflict-oriented framing of issues which perpetuate narrow, negative stereotypes. These problems are even more pronounced in the under-resourced and fiercely deadline-driven newsrooms operating in real time – like radio, online and 24/7 TV news.

The women cited here also called on editors, particularly those in the commercial media who are perceived to resort to tabloidisation as a means of boosting sales/ratings, to dig deeper on stories – to go beyond superficial coverage in an effort to access ‘truth’. A number of the women surveyed also called for more ‘inclusive’ stories which situate Muslim women ‘as part of the greater Australian identity rather than outside of it’.

There is certainly room for improvement in journalistic practices as applied to coverage of Muslim women, exploration of alternative models and greater concentration on in-depth stories of consequence rather than conflict: the sort of reporting described by SBS’ Paul Cutler as ‘distinctive’ and ‘discretionary’. But there are also significant barriers to such progress: there is the cost in terms

of resources and time; the consequences of extreme deadline pressure in the 24/7 news cycle, and the lack of community awareness around news production realities as acknowledged by one of the Muslim journalists surveyed for this research.

Apart from community media education and changed reporting practice, an obvious strategy for penetrating the barriers that separate reporters from minorities and inhibit culturally competent reporting of them, is meaningful interaction between the two groups – in real life or online. And while it is incumbent upon the news media to attempt re-engagement with this marginalised group and adapt practices to encourage such interaction, Muslim women are beginning to realise that the first step to surmounting these barriers may involve them by-passing the mainstream and seeking alternative representation via community or local publications and new media avenues. They are also learning to build resilience to negative, damaging media coverage – even if that involves temporary disengagement from the mainstream.

Whatever approach is adopted, until such barriers are penetrated, there will continue to be a twofold loss: a missed opportunity for journalists in terms of valuable, newsworthy content featuring Muslim women; and a missed opportunity for society as a whole, and Muslim women specifically, because, as some of the participants in this research recognised, the media *can* play an important role in community education and it has potential as a vehicle for social cohesion.

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1. ⁱ The title of this paper refers to a controversial ABC TV News documentary about two Australian female converts to Islam called Jihad Sheilas which aired in February 2008. It is

also the title of a critique of this documentary which appeared in New Matilda

(<http://newmatilda.com/2008/02/07/jihad-sheilas-or-media-martyrs%3F>)

2. The Muslim women who participated in this research are represented as W1-W18 or J1-2 (J indicating the woman is a journalist) in this chapter.
3. Said, Edward *Orientalism*, Penguin, London, 2003
4. *Anthropology Today*, 'The Politics of Dress' vol. 21, no. 6, 2005, front & back covers.
5. Donnell, Allyson p. 123 cited in Macdonald, Myra 'Muslim Women and the Veil' *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2006, p. 19
6. Macmaster, Neil and Lewis, Toni 'Orientalism: From Unveiling to Hyperveiling' *Journal of European Studies* 1998, p.3.
7. Manji, Irshad and Clarke, Barbara 'The Politics of Saving Muslim Women' *Canadian Dimension* , vol. 26, 1992 p. 35
8. The hijab (also referred to as a veil, head cover or headscarf) is the Arabic word for barrier. It is essentially a scarf-like piece of cloth worn by some Muslim women in some Islamic cultures to cover the hair as an expression of piety, based on interpretations of Qur'anic directives for modesty but it is also sometimes more generally applied to the act of covering, (IWWCV, p. 41).
9. Macdonald, Myra 'Muslim Women and the Veil'. p7.
10. Fahmy, Shahira 'Picturing Afghan Women: A Content Analysis of AP Wire Photographs During the Taliban Regime and After the Fall of the Taliban Regime' pp. 91-112. *Gazette* vol. 66, no. 2, 2004

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11. See Phillips, Gail and Tapsall, Suellen 'Australian Television News Trends. First Results From a Longitudinal Study' *Australian Journalism Monographs*, no. 9, 2007; Phillips and Tapsall 'Ethnic Diversity in Television News: An Australian Case Study' *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2007 pp 15-33
 12. See Manning, Peter 'Arabic and Muslim People In Sydney's Daily Newspapers, Before: and After September 11' *Media International Australia* no. 109, 2003, pp. 50-70. 2003, Manning *Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism: Reporting Arabic and Muslim People in Sydney's Newspapers*, Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, Sydney, 2003; Poynting, Scott "'Bin Laden in the suburbs': Attacks on Arab and Muslim Australians before and after 11' *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, vol. 14, 2002, pp. 43-64; September 2002; Poynting, Scott, Noble, Greg and Tabar, Paul 'Middle Eastern Appearances: "ethnic gangs", moral panic and media framing' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* vol. 34, no. 1, 2001 pp67-90; Akbarzadeh, Shahram and Smith, Bianca *The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media (The Age and Herald Sun newspapers)*, Monash University, Melbourne, 2005; NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, *Race for the Headlines: Racism and Media Discourse* 2003; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 'Isma-Listen', *national consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians 2003-2004*. Canberra: HREOC 2004.
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 20. Aly, Anne 'Australian Muslims and the Discourse on Terror', *Australian Journal of Social Issues* vol. 42, no. 1, 2007, p. 33.
 21. Ibid p. 34.
 22. Posetti, 'Unveiling News Coverage of Muslim Women: Reporting in the Age of Terror', 2007 pp. 74-7.
 23. Sykes, Jolyon and Green, Kerry 'The Dangers of Dealing with Journalists' Paper delivered at ANZCA, Brisbane, July 2003. p. 1.
 24. Interview with Paul Cutler recorded by the author, May 2008.
 25. ibid
 26. ^{xxv} ibid
 27. ^{xxvi} ibid
 28. Champion, Mukti-Jain 'Diversity or Just Colour By Numbers?', *British Journalism Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2006, pp. 71-76 p. 71.