

Shifting the dynamics in popular culture on Islamophobic narratives

Abstract: Prior to the Christchurch mosque massacres on 15 March 2019, studies on New Zealand media showed that representations of Islam and Muslims were largely negative. Muslims were depicted as terror-prone and a threat to democracy and free speech. This popular media culture of negative framing is not unique to New Zealand as global media studies show a consistent and disproportionately high negative labelling of Islam and Muslims compared with adherents of other faiths. This article focuses on the role of government and media to shift the dynamics in popular culture on Islamophobic media narratives. A critical analysis of the actions of these powerful sectors at the Conference on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism (CTVE) in 2021 show an opportunity to address issues management and cultural competence that could change the way Muslims and Islam are perceived and represented in the media.

Keywords: ACMC2021, auto ethnography, hate rhetoric, institutionalised bias, Islamophobia, media representations, mixed paradigm, New Zealand, popular culture, terrorism, truth challenges

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FOLLOWING the Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) into the mosque attacks, some recommendations were outlined to counter terrorism and address hate rhetoric. My article critically analyses the actions of the government, and to some extent the media, at the Conference on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism (CTVE) in 2021. It takes a semi-autoethnographic and mixed paradigm approach using both Anglo-centric and Islamic theories of communication including notions of popular culture, media representations and cultural competence. Results show significant issues in institutionalised bias which interfered with genuine engagement between the government and the affected community. Recommendations include acknowledgment of issues by the government and media alongside cultural competence and capability training to address intercultural awareness and ethnocentric tendencies. More equitable and meaningful exchanges between media, government and the Muslim community could shift the dynamics in popular culture on Islamophobic media narratives.

Background—The Muslim identity and popular culture of media narratives

Islamophobia is defined as intense dislike for, fear of and prejudice against Islam or Muslims and Islamophobic media narratives refer to news stories that contain hate rhetoric, stereotypes and negative media representations of Islam and Muslims. Media studies show that Western media has a tendency to perpetuate negative stereotypes of Muslims, including publication of false narratives (Rahman & Emadi, 2018). While there are varied interpretations and categories of popular culture, media consistently present Islam and the Muslim identity as vile and monstrous (Pinfari, 2019). This presentation is dangerous and destructive when viewed through the lens of popular culture, defined as everyday experiences within a socio-cultural space where ‘narratives, images and activities are popular and meaningful for society’ (Fitch & Motion, 2018, p.1).

With meaning heavily embedded in a context of the pervasive and familiar, popular culture is often aligned with dominant ideologies and patriotic rhetoric in support of political agendas. These include the fake American propaganda discourse during conflicts and war initiatives to justify military invasion such as accusing Iraq of having ‘weapons of mass destruction’ and accusing Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait of killing premature infants, to justify the Gulf War (Oddo, 2018). Islamophobia in the Western media is common with considerable research documenting the media’s increasingly harmful role in perpetuating a stereotype of Muslims as ‘the other’ and Islam as a violent faith (Eid, 2014; Morey et al, 2019; Neiwert et al, 2017; Rahman & Emadi, 2018).

The extent and frequency of framed negative messages about Islam and Muslims play out globally in all forms of media and these perceptions are reinforced on the psyche of a mass audience. There is a constant barrage of films, TV dramas and media stories depicting Muslims and Islam as problematic to democracy and freedom of expression. In popular media culture, the negative framing of Islam and Muslims has been correlated with hate-motivated attacks on innocent people. Research has shown that there is a direct correlation between spikes in attacks on Muslims and the publication of Islamophobic news stories (OnePath Network, 2017). While researching my study of social media news and its impact on the Muslim identity (2020), it was notable that despite improvements in media representations of Muslims in New Zealand after the Christchurch mosque massacres, Muslim women continued to be undervalued in media narratives. Islamophobia is manifested through hate rhetoric and violent attacks on Muslims, their properties, places of worship and on people perceived to be Muslims.

The human cost and harm to social cohesion makes it necessary to address Islamophobic media narratives and recommend a shift in the dynamics of this popular media culture. Overall, there was a marked difference between New Zealand media representations of Islam and Muslims before and after the Christchurch mosque attacks. There was ‘a significant shift from the negative othering rhetoric

of international media to an inclusive national approach in the tone of the New Zealand press' (Rahman, 2020, p. 360). The media, government and community leaders were identified as key players in influencing this change—they constituted the dynamics that shifted popular media culture of Muslim representation.

Following the RCI into the mosque attacks, recommendations included finding ways to counter terrorism and address hate rhetoric and to promote social cohesion. The CTVE conference in June 2021 saw the participation of government, media and community leaders. Actions and reactions at the conference were analysed to determine whether there was authentic engagement or tokenism on the part of media and the government. Engagement literature (Johnson & Taylor, 2018) identifies empowerment and co-creation of meanings in relationships as authentic and genuine whereas tokenism shows an element of insincerity, with an appearance of inclusion without meaningful outcomes for the marginalised group. This article recognises the complex nature of government-public intercultural expectations and engagement. Understanding issues can result in more meaningful interactions and desired outcomes, such as improved understanding and more informed depictions of Islam and Muslims in media narratives.

Methodology and theoretical framework

A multi-layered, mixed paradigm approach was applied using the Islamic theory of *ta'will*, dialogic perspectives in Islam and autoethnography as a critical reflective process (Pitard, 2017; Rahman, 2016; Rahman & Emadi, 2018). Integration of Islamic concepts was a vital theoretical initiative as even media studies on Islam show a focus on Anglo-centric theories, promoting Western journalism and ways of understanding (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017).

Briefly, the theory of *ta'will* is concerned with seeking a truthful interpretation of meaning. It involves questioning perceptions which are based on fragmented sensory experiences that can present a limited view of understanding. As interpreter of meaning, the researcher should question the apparent and consider the hidden meanings. In Islamic understanding, dialogue and persuasion are not mutually exclusive. Both are ethical and used to create understanding. Persuasion in Islam is evidence-based and truthful, and not defined by winning the argument.

'Autoethnography' as a critical reflective process required assessing one's own cultural assumptions and beliefs when interpreting data (Pitard, 2017) and encouraged a level of objectivity. Partly autoethnographic, the materials used for this study included personal notes and records of community feedback at the counter terrorism conference. Situating the researcher in both subjective and objective roles gives this study a unique advantage. It presents a holistic view of the issues from the outside looking in as well as the inside looking out.

Findings

The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attacks on Christchurch mosques

The RCI was established on 8 April 2019 and submitted its report on 26 November 2020. There were 1,168 submissions, 96 percent from individuals (including researchers and academics) and 4 percent from organisations. The submissions showed clear evidence of personal and observed discrimination and institutionalised bias. Under the summary of submissions (Chapter 5) titled ‘What people told us about the national security system and countering-terrorism effort’, there were ‘repeated references to the activities of extreme right-wing individuals and groups that were being largely ignored by public sector agencies’ (Royal Commission of Inquiry Summary of Submissions, 2020, p. 41). One academic noted that

New Zealand authorities have focused their counter-terrorism resources almost exclusively on Muslim communities in New Zealand. New Zealand authorities appear to have been institutionally blind to terror threats from white nationalist and far right actors and groups, and threats to Muslim communities in particular. (Royal Commission of Inquiry Summary of Submissions, 2020, p. 42)

A community organisation asserted that ‘If we are all checked [sic] and vetted equally [at the border], this tragedy could have been avoided’ (Royal Commission of Inquiry Summary of Submissions, 2020, p. 35). Under the summary of submissions (Chapter 8) titled ‘What people told us about diversity and creating a more inclusive New Zealand’, nearly an entire page outlined the media’s negative role in enabling hate rhetoric by tarnishing the image of Islam and Muslims through damaging narratives.

We received some submissions noting concern that social institutions, in particular media and politics, show high levels of Islamophobia. These submitters were concerned about the speed at which social media can disseminate hate speech. We were told that studies on the media demonstrate the majority of stories on Muslim communities and Islam are negative and tend to focus on violence, extremism and terrorism, reinforcing the commonly-held



Figure 1: Programme cover of the New Zealand Hui on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism, 2021.

view that Muslim communities and individuals are a threat. We were told that the media has condoned the vilification of Muslim communities by failing to provide a counter-narrative. This has resulted in the racism that Muslim individuals experience daily. (Royal Commission of Inquiry Summary of Submissions, 2020, p. 88)

Interestingly, in the final report, there was nothing about how this might be addressed under ‘Recommendations to improve social cohesion and New Zealand’s response to our increasingly diverse population’ (Royal Commission of Inquiry Report, 2020). While the media calls government and political leaders to account, the process of calling media to account is left to marginalised communities. Yet, despite the media’s absence in the RCI recommendations, the first New Zealand Conference on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism in June 2021 included a media panel on its first day to discuss the media’s role in reporting Muslims. This indicates that there was tacit acknowledgement of the media’s part in hate crimes against Muslims. However, the non-inclusion of the media under the RCI recommendations showed an unwillingness to acknowledge a notable part of the problem.

Positive changes require awareness of what needs to change. After the mosque attacks, institutionalised bias and systemic oppression continued to plague Muslims in academia and media (Rahman, 2020; Salahshour & Boamah, 2020). The RCI consulted diverse Muslim community groups and identified ways to address the issues raised by Muslims, including counter terrorism, support for social cohesion, Islamophobia in media narratives, institutionalised bias and hate rhetoric (FIANZ, 2020). There was a genuine effort to include Muslims in discussions where decisions would directly affect the community.

Conference on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism

The government called for the first Conference on ‘Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism’ (CTVE) titled ‘He Whenua Taurikura (A Country at Peace)’ in Māori, from 14-16 June 2021. The conference was a closed-door event in that delegates attended by invitation. Although it was live streamed for other interested participants, the streaming links were not well publicised. The conference programme included ‘expert panellists’ discussing topics on countering terrorism, embracing diversity, addressing the media’s role in building cultural understanding, monitoring hate rhetoric on social media and countering terrorism in the digital world.

The conference also included a discussion of the strategic approach for countering terrorism by using the principles of partnership found in Aotearoa New Zealand’s founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi and the standards of human rights. While there were many engagement and network opportunities, there were also pronounced instances of marginalisation and silencing of Muslim voices as well as a disregard for the officials on the ground during the terror crisis who could have offered useful perspectives.

1. Marginalisation of trauma victims of the terror attack

Ironically, survivors and trauma victims of the horrific event were marginalised at the conference. The hui was needed because of New Zealand's failure to protect this marginalised group and yet, instead of putting the victim stories at the start of the hui, the victims and their families were relegated to the second day before breakfast. It was disrespectful that victims were given 15 minutes to talk about 'What hate looks like now', followed by a half hour breakfast break and another 15 minutes talk-time after breakfast. This was vastly different from the hour plus of uninterrupted time given to panellists.

2. Silencing of Muslims

The inclusion of a non-specialist in the countering terrorism panel who clearly supported Zionism, a political ideology supporting colonial 'settler groups' who terrorise a marginalised people, was insulting, especially since trauma victims at the hui had lost loved ones because of a hate crime. This hui was not the platform for ideological agendas. The decision was culturally insensitive and tone deaf. For a conference spokesperson to then implicitly chide those who walked out by insisting they should have stayed to be respectful to different perspectives is to further silence a group of Muslims from expressing their disagreement peacefully.

3. Marginalisation of Christchurch's crisis-response leadership

Attendees at the conference highlighted that both the mayor of Christchurch, Lianne Dalziel, and the vice-chancellor of the University of Canterbury, Professor Cheryl de la Rey, were given speaking slots the evening before the conference and were not part of the discourse at the conference itself. Former Police Commissioner Mike Bush, who was at the centre of overseeing the police response and security following the attack, was not included to give his input at this event. He had been vocal about police bias in handling Māori and diversity groups and worked to improve public trust prior to leaving the service (Cheng & Leask, 2020). While criteria for selection of relevant speakers for the hui is unclear, decisions seemed to discount those who were part of Christchurch's crisis-response leadership, especially in internal security and city management.

4. Discounting the Muslim diversity perspective in preference for the dominant view

An invited historian categorised Māori actions in a clash involving Māori and the Crown as 'terrorism'. A Muslim Māori conference participant, who had objected to this with good reason was told that history had varied interpretations of events and that it was 'okay'. Yet, it cannot be 'okay' for a fully functioning democratic society if only the dominant culture view of history is taught at tertiary level while diversity voices continued to be suppressed and unsupported.

5. Lack of acknowledgment and issue management

There was only 15 percent of Muslim representation in the panels. During the panel session, the coordinator interrupted the Muslim panellist and her talk-time was given to a mainstream media commentator, whose task seemed to be promotion of local media and whose talk-time appeared to be noticeably longer.



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Figure 2: The author, Khairiah A Rahman, with Mayor Lianne Dalziel of Christchurch in 2021.

None of the other panellists' talk was disrupted. This was witnessed by diverse community groups who registered their complaints afterwards. There was also failure by media to acknowledge the effects of misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam. One mainstream media representative disagreed that the media caused harm despite strong evidence of false and questionable news content such as the one on jihadi brides in New Zealand (*Otago Daily Times*, 2016). Another had falsely alleged that Al Noor Mosque trained extremists (Matthewson, 2014). This was originally published in *The Press*, now managed by Stuff.co.nz. The claim was later redacted (Editorial: Passing connections do not radicalise a mosque, 2014) following a complaint from the secretary of FIANZ. Sadly, this was one of the mosques where peaceful worshippers were attacked and massacred on 15 March 2019. The terrorist responsible had targeted the mosque believing 'it had a history of extremism' (FIANZ, 2020, p. 29). Unless media acknowledge the heavy burden of responsible reporting and are more mindful in representation matters, they will have blood on their hands.

Conclusion

Genuine engagement

The famous crisis response to the Christchurch mosque attacks by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, had led the way for compassion and inclusiveness. The speed of her administration when dealing with gun laws, the prompt setting up of the RCI and the organisation of the CTVE conference were notable attempts by the government to address the difficult and complex issues of terrorism and what enables it. Overall, the RCI report (2020) was comprehensive in outlining

laws governing hate rhetoric, security profiling and social cohesion policies and programmes, including the work to be undertaken by the new Ministry of Ethnic Communities. There were also many relevant inputs by expert panellists on the nature of terrorism, hate talk, how diverse marginalised communities could be protected as well as discussions on the roles and responsibilities of traditional and social media. There were also opportunities at breaks and mealtimes to network with other participants and address communal issues.

Tokenism

There were clear elements of tokenism, where decisions relating to the conference lacked insight and sincerity, such as when victims of the mosque attacks and their families were given a tight and disrupted timeline to share their stories compared to the panellists. Additionally, victim stories were scheduled to run before the conference programme on the second day. Neither the mayor of Christchurch nor the police chief who were involved during the immediate response were invited as panellists at the conference.

While the topic of media controversy was mentioned in the executive summary of the RCI report and the submissions by individuals and groups, it was not addressed under recommendations. The media was simply discounted as a contributing factor to disinformation and Islamophobic-based hate attacks.

Issue management and cultural competence

The inclusion of a non-expert counter-terrorism commentator with a political agenda (Zionism) was questionable and insensitive. There was also condescension at times towards diversity views, feelings and opinion. For example, participants at the conference learned that terrorism history taught at higher levels of learning were based on the dominant culture's perspective. There appears to be a lack of issue awareness and cultural competence, the capability to use a range of cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills for appropriate communication with varying cultural groups.

There was no acknowledgement from the media of previous false representations. Nor was there acknowledgement or apology from the government of its lack of action on the reports of abuse raised by the the Islamic Women's Council of New Zealand (IWCNZ) between 2014 and 2018, prior to the Christchurch attack. IWCNZ had reported many incidents of abuse and discrimination to the Ministry of Social Development, the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service, Department of Internal Affairs in Hamilton and the State Services Commissioner but no action was taken. While there was no explicit admission of fault, both the government and media appear to recognise that changes in their respective sectors were needed to improve their treatment of Muslims.

Overall, there was evidence of deep-seated institutionalised bias, discrimination, lack of cultural competence and issue awareness. Clearly, dominant cultural

perspectives shape agendas. Politically motivated actions and culturally insensitive worldviews of those in decision-making positions precluded and oppressed Muslims, normalising their discrimination. Attendees at the Counter Terrorism Conference said how the government should work closely with Māori as host and mediator because Te Tiriti-led understanding was vital. Only those affected by historical violence, marginalisation and discrimination can appreciate the pain of Muslims whose identity has been so exclusively linked to violence and perpetuated by Islamophobic narratives in the media. The consequence of this has been the shaping of public opinion that informed policies which profiled Muslims negatively and exposed Muslims to hate rhetoric and attacks.

Acknowledging the issues would mean the start of true dialogue and genuine engagement. Government and media could do with cultural competence and capability training, to address intercultural awareness, ethnocentric tendencies and develop the practice of meaningful exchanges. These shared strategies could improve communication between Muslim communities and the public sectors of government and the media and ultimately cause a popular culture paradigm shift in the treatment of Muslims, the rhetoric surrounding them and the media narratives about Islam.

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