

Representations of Islam and Muslims in New Zealand media

Abstract: In the global media scene, media ownership is controlled by groups with political agendas. Intolerance of ‘the other’, from Islam and migrants to people of colour, show the rise of fundamentally prejudiced groups who relate well to negative media representations of ‘the other’, further fuelling financial support for dominant public voices, at the expense of those silenced by discrimination. Media studies on Islam show negative portrayals in Western media which neglect the Muslim voice. Some reasons include news culture, lack of knowledge about Islam and unawareness of the consequences from such narratives. This article identifies the growing trend of stories in the New Zealand media relating to ‘Islamic terrorism’ and critically analyses a random sampling of five news articles between 2014 and 2016 in terms of the negative, positive and ambivalent news content, both in their use of the written text and visual representations of Islam and Muslims. The tendency to use negative framing is evident with the absence or manipulation of the Muslim voice. Using the Islamic perspective of dialogue and persuasion, the theory of *Ta’will*, and socio-political rationale, the effects of and motivations for the written and visual news content are discussed. A case is made for a greater understanding of the textual and visual elements and more ethical reporting through intercultural engagement.

Keywords: bias, dialogue and persuasion, framing, intercultural communication, Islam, Islamic theory of *Ta’will*, media representations, New Zealand

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Introduction

THERE is a tendency for international media to frame Islam negatively and almost exclusively link Islam with terrorism. Studies in media representation have highlighted how Western media freely stereotype Muslims¹

(Ahmad, 2018; Eid, 2014; Fitriyani, Karmidi & Estiani, 2015; Kabir, 2016). In such studies and in the context of this article, Western media refer to media owned by groups in the Western world (defined by historical Greek and Roman influences) which have socially divisive and culturally prejudiced outlooks. In such media, terms like ‘Islamic fundamentalism’, ‘Islamic extremism’ and ‘Islamic radicalism’ are used to describe violent actions by Muslims compared to cautious description such as ‘hate crime’, rather than ‘domestic terrorism’, when reporting the violent actions by non-Muslims (Bergen, 2015; Eid, 2014; Ruiz-Grossman, 2017). Islam dominates the ‘terror’ landscape in these media stories although a study on ‘homegrown terror’ in the United States from 2008 to 2016, found that ‘far right plots and attacks outnumber Islamist incidents by 2 to 1’ (Neiwert, Ankrom, Kaplan & Pham, 2017).

The biased tone against Islam in news content is also captured in media studies. In a meta-analysis of 345 published studies on representations of Islam in the media from 2000–2015, Ahmed and Matthes (2017) reported largely negative representations with majority of the studies covering Western countries, ‘while Muslim countries and Muslim media have been neglected’ (p. 219). The authors also noted that these studies lacked comparative research and neglected visuals and online media. They further reported that most studies investigated the themes of ‘migration’, ‘terrorism’, and ‘war’, showing ‘that Muslims tended to be negatively framed, while Islam is dominantly portrayed as a violent religion’ (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017, p. 219).

As stories from international news networks are picked up and repeated in local news, it is necessary to understand how Islam is reported in major regional media. In 2017, OnePath network, a not-for-profit Islamic video production and media outlet based in Sydney, looked at how five of Australia’s biggest newspapers reported on Islam. Owned by Rupert Murdoch’s company News Ltd., these newspapers (*The Australian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Herald Sun*, *The Courier Mail* and *The Advertiser*) published 2891 negative articles that referred to ‘Islam’ or ‘Muslims’ alongside words like *violence*, *extremism*, *terrorism* or *radical*. On average, there were ‘over 8 articles a day in the Murdoch press slamming Muslims’ with 152 front pages of negative news about Islam in 2017 (OnePath network, 2017, p. 6). Stories by six of the most controversial commentators in the Australian news media were analysed, where ‘on average, 31 percent of their opinion pieces were devoted to Islam, with the overwhelming majority of them being negative and divisive in nature’. The study concluded that ‘the way the media talks about Islam in Australia is disproportionate, divisive and dangerous’.

The disproportionately negative media narratives about Islam have developed a popular culture for labelling violent actions as Islamically-motivated to the extent that destructive behaviour is blamed on the religion rather than the personalities responsible (Neiwert, 2017). The snowball effect over time has

caused tremendous fear and anxiety on the psyche of the Australian public with 49 percent calling for a ban on Muslim immigration (Essential Research, 2016). Yet, this fear is irrational since, in a study on non-Muslim Australians' knowledge of Islam, '70 percent acknowledge they know little to nothing' about Islam or Muslims (O'Donnell, Davis & Ewart, 2017, p. 42). The persistent Western media bias against Islam has ultimately created an unreasonable culture of hate and fear, consequently resulting in frequent unwarranted attacks on innocent Muslims.

The Islamophobia Register Australia was established in September 2014 by Mariam Veiszadeh, following a spike in the number of reported violent incidents towards Muslims. Based on data from the Register, researchers from various organisations including Charles Sturt University, The University of Western Australia and Just Media Advocacy, published a Report on Islamophobia in Australia 2014-2016. The report discussed both institutional and political Islamophobia, noting correlations between spikes in reported abuse of Muslims, anti-terror legislation and negative media coverage of Australian Muslim leaders.

Despite the media referring to Muslims as a typical group, Muslims are diverse. A Pew Research Centre survey (2017) reported that most American Muslims are open to multiple interpretations of Islam. 64 percent say there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of Islam while 31 percent say there is only one true way to interpret its teachings. This balance is similar to American Christians' perception of their faith with 60 percent saying there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of Christianity, while 34 percent say there is just one true way to interpret their faith. Despite this similarity in faith interpretation, Muslims continue to be typically misrepresented in the media. Attempts to address Muslim community issues, such as *hijab* (headcover) and *halal* (permissible) food on national media, have met with opposition and backlash. 2.6 percent of the population in Australia that identify as Muslims is seen as 'alien, foreign and incompatible with Australian cultural values' (Aly 2007, p. 29). Overall, Muslims are regarded as one homogenous group stereotyped by violence and intolerance.

Studies on Islam in the New Zealand media are limited to three national newspapers (*Otago Daily Times*, *The Press* and *The New Zealand Herald*) and largely analysed as negative (Kabir, 2016; Kabir & Obaidul Hamid, 2015; Kabir & Bourk, 2012). Some contradictions in representations relate to the difference between hard news and editorials, suggesting that a recycling of news stories from international sites were responsible for the conflicting narratives in the same media outlets. In their study of news stories between October 2005 and September 2006, Kabir and Bourk (2012, p. 333) explained that with few exceptions,

...local Islamic community and culture is largely invisible in the New Zealand mainstream press. Neither negative stereotypes are specifically promulgated nor are many positive depictions presented.

Consequently, Muslims are advised to counter the negative media depictions via Muslim media responses (Kabir & Bourk, 2012; Onepath Network, 2017). The lack of interest in representing a voiceless community by national media has not been adequately addressed in media studies although a recent study involving interviews with 29 journalists, journalism educators and journalism students in Australia and New Zealand identified a range of factors for the dearth of accurate stories on Muslims and Islam. These included newsroom culture, the lack of knowledge about the Islamic faith and unawareness of the impact of journalistic actions on Muslims in social-political contexts (Ewart, Pearson & Healy, 2016). The acknowledgement of ignorance appears to be normalised since even media studies on Islam tend to have an Anglo-centric focus (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017), giving attention to Western media, Western journalism and applying Western ways of interpreting and knowing.

Rationale and methodology

A search on the Newztext database showed that between 1 January 2014 and 31 December 2017, international news stories on Islam have increased annually, showing a corresponding increase between local and international news. The search used the topics ‘Islam’, ‘Islamic terrorism’, and ‘Islamic jihad’ for both international news (UK Independent and news wires) and New Zealand news. The trend shows a growing number of narratives on Islam identified as ‘Islamic terrorism’ and ‘Islamic jihad’ compared to ‘Islam’ alone (Table 1). In 2014, there were five times more stories on Islam categorised as ‘Islamic terrorism’ rather than just ‘Islam’ to nearly seven times more in 2016. Stories on ‘Islamic jihad’ are also significantly greater than stories on ‘Islam’ alone.

Table 1: Representations of Islam in NZ media, 2014-2017

Topic	2014		2015		2016		2017	
	NZ	Int'l	NZ	Int'l	NZ	Int'l	NZ	Int'l
“Islam”	1,233	1,561	1,510	1,934	1,015	1,957	1,376	2,515
“Islamic terrorism”	7,178	8,258	10,301	11,683	8,024	10,745	7,774	11,472
“Islamic jihad”	5,630	6,364	8,407	9,291	6,148	7,780	5,199	6,997

Note: Results of searches using the terms "Islam", "Islamic terrorism" and "Islamic jihad" on Newztext database on 17 July 2018

Interest in Islam is growing with the results clearly illustrating a tendency to typecast Islam negatively. Stories on “jihad” interpret the term to mean violent acts rather than its original positive Islamic definition which is a struggle towards self-improvement and goodness. More critical analysis of media stories on Islam and Muslims in New Zealand is needed to address some of the gaps

outlined in research such as situating the Muslim voice in media reports and interpreting content through the use of Islamic theories. A random sampling of five articles on Islam in New Zealand media between 2014 and 2016 will be discussed in this article² The analyses seek to determine the tone and the persuasive content in the depiction of Islam (the religion) and Muslims (followers of Islam), both textually and visually. Islamic theory of dialogue and persuasion (Rahman, 2016) is used to interpret the textual purpose while Islamic theory of *Ta'will* by Mulla Sadra Shirazi (c. 1571/2–1640) (Emadi, 2014) is applied to interpret visuals used. Textual analysis will be addressed first followed by the visual elements.

Construction of textual meaning

Dialogue and persuasion from the Islamic perspective

Traditionally, dialogue and persuasion in communication studies are seen to be mutually exclusive. A dialogic exchange is seen as impossible if participants use persuasion in their communication approach. Dialogue requires mutual respect, empathy, listening with understanding and suspension of predetermined outcomes. Since persuasion has an end result that seeks to influence and shape the views of another, it is seen as external to dialogue. Also, in a dialogic exchange, there are no power imbalances and parties have equal exchange opportunities. This is often not the case in a persuasive communication context. The persuader would likely have some privileged information that can be used to sway opinion.

Another difference between dialogue and persuasion in mainstream thinking is that dialogue is regarded as the ideal communication model while persuasion is seen to be unethical, prone to manipulation and deceit. At its worst, persuasion is akin to propaganda, where lies are manufactured as truth while at its best, it can be an ethical way of presenting truth to advocate a point of view. In Islam, any communication that resorts to intentionally manipulating the facts or misleading the discussion is considered a sin and therefore un-Islamic. Only ethical persuasion is permissible, that is to advocate on the grounds of truthful evidence. Based on her preliminary study of dialogue and persuasion from the Islamic perspective, Rahman (2016) found that Muslim communicators and religious scholars expounded on dialogue and persuasion with reference to the *Quran* (considered by Muslims to be the verbatim word of God) and *Hadiths* (records of the prophet's advice and practices). In Islam, dialogue and persuasion are not mutually exclusive. In fact, persuasion is considered ethical and resides within dialogue. This may be best illustrated by the missionary purpose of Islam which is to share the message of the one god by the last prophet. In conveying this message, there is the persuasive element of advocacy and conviction.

However, persuasion in Islam ends in the delivery rather than a predetermined outcome. Conversion is not the end goal that defines persuasion in Islam. As God's attribute is 'the turner of hearts', so acceptance of the message rests with the recipient and God's wisdom.

Thus, persuasion in Islam is not about achieving an end by a stipulated time. It is about presenting viewpoints with conviction and evidences. It sits within dialogue simply because to truly understand the other, one should come away from an exchange with new knowledge and appreciation of the other, whether or not one agrees with the message. Extending this theoretical analysis to news stories, the representation of the Muslim voice will be identified, if they exist at all, to determine the purpose of the articles. Was there a dialogic process that could suggest engagement and some understanding of the reported situation? Also, what persuasive elements were used? Do they promote opinions that were factually presented to achieve a purpose?

Textual analysis of the Muslim representation is divided into three content categories—positive and balanced, negative, and ambivalent or conflicting.

Positive and balanced representation

Article 1: Lifting the veil on the life of Muslim women in NZ
(*The New Zealand Herald*, 2014)

The tone is largely neutral. The article presents the experiences of several Muslim women and leaders in the community. It provides a platform for the Muslim women to explain their dresscode. A female leader from the local Islamic Council explained how the *burqa* (a fully-hooded covering) was not a requirement of Islam but more of a personal and cultural preference. Another female from a Malaysian Muslim association denounced the *burqa* as oppressive for those forced to wear them. A male Muslim academic also explained the limitations of a study on Muslim female dress code in the United States which only surveyed Muslim women from seven Muslim-majority countries. The article depicts a diverse community of women from different ethnicities and experiences. The five women interviewed supported the hijab as a marker of the Muslim female identity, although each had varied experiences. The stories of three born-Muslims and two converts to Islam are captured in their own voices through direct and indirect quotes. One of the converts spoke of her contentment in her assured self-identity as a hijab-wearing undergraduate while another spoke of living a 'double life', practising her Muslim faith in private for fear of social repercussions. Such contents depict the individual woman's handling of her Muslim identity and the social reality of her struggles. There is evidence of Islamic dialogue used here as the stories highlight the good and bad about the hijab experience, leaving readers to make their own interpretations. The

Muslim women are presented as a group that is self-empowered and spiritually conscious although they face social challenges both internally, within their communities, and externally from society's discrimination. The writer's choice of content inclusion reflects a genuine attempt to present the complexities of the Muslim women's narratives.

Negative representation

Article 2: 'Jihadi bride' fears over Kiwi women
(*Otago Daily Times*, 2016)

The report is short, but the tone is alarming and focused on specific information that cannot be verified. For example, the director of the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) had confirmed that there was 'less than a dozen' *jihadi* brides who had travelled to Iraq and Syria from New Zealand but it was unclear if they had gone 'to fight themselves or to support Isis fighters'. From the context of the news story, '*Jihadi*' describes a violent action in support of a group associated with terror. The media is presenting its own definition of '*jihad*' and '*jihadi* brides' through quotes with negative interpretations. For example, the SIS director identified 'a pattern of people who seem kind of disengaged in some way with productive life' and that 'there were a range of age and a range of backgrounds—quite a diversity of people actually'. These details describe several *jihadi* brides. Yet there was no information on how many brides had returned. The article simply reported that the SIS director would not comment on this. Also, it was unclear how these brides were monitored as according to the SIS director, 'SIS did not know about every single person'. With basic information missing, it is rather unusual that this article was published. The alarming combination of the visual of a man brandishing a weapon with a caption identifying him as a terrorist creates the impression that *jihadi* women from New Zealand were joining such men. The overall choice of content was clearly biased and lacking evidence. The persuasive content was meant to cause alarm and create fear and suspicion of the Muslim community. Subsequent news reports have exposed these claims of *jihadi* brides to be false (Green Party, 2016; *The Nation*, 2016; Watkin, 2016). The Muslim voice is completely absent from this story.

Article 3: Imams sent to New Zealand to foil radicals
(*The New Zealand Herald*, 2016)

The overall tone is suspicious and alarming while the content is misleading. Although there is inclusion of the Egyptian Ambassador and FIANZ (Federation of Islamic Associations New Zealand), the story is framed as a cover-up to distract people from a potential trade partnership between Egypt (referred to as 'a dictatorship') and New Zealand. The intentional juxtaposition of the two conflicting political systems creates tension and incites reaction.

The heading ‘Imams sent to New Zealand to foil radicals’ arouses fear as it gives the impression that there are radical groups operating in the country. Also, the caption for the visual states that these ‘Cairo-educated imams ... “take control” of New Zealand mosques ... to reduce radicalisation and counter jihadism’, suggesting that ‘jihad’ is a negative concept and that radicalised teachings are present in mosques when there is no evidence of this.

The caption intentionally creates a sense of power struggle in the arrangement of text: ‘Egypt government...”take control” of New Zealand’. This presented context of aggression by a foreign political system is aggravated by the terms ‘radicalisation’ and ‘jihadism’, inciting panic and anxiety. The story cites ‘an international expert’ who questioned the motive of the Egyptian embassy, suggesting that a prospective trade deal has the government ‘cosying up to a dictatorship’. Clearly, the voice given to Muslims in this article was undermined and depicted as controlling and manipulative.

Ambivalent or conflicting representation

*Article 4: Fears of terror in our own backyard
(Sunday Star-Times, 2014)*

This article reports that a group of Muslim men have been identified as potential threats to society. It introduces a religious leader as both a ‘firebrand preacher’ promoting ‘*jihad* against infidels’ and a peaceful man who engages youth. Prominence was given to the negative attributes by introducing the unfavourable elements first. The caption under the preacher’s photograph reinforces this with ‘Firebrand preacher or man of peace’ in upper case. Both the preacher’s son and another Muslim protested the preacher’s goodness and blamed the unfair allegations on a rival faction and international security agencies that target the Muslim community without facts. There is intentional irony in the presentation of the Muslim voice that ‘just want to live in New Zealand peacefully... but we will attack when we are attacked’. It is alarming when one proclaims peace but is prepared to retaliate rather than seek justice through laws of the land.

The article reports that Muslim leaders are concerned about aggression by local governments, such as targeting Muslims in terror raids by Australian police, causing unnecessary fear and mistrusts of the government among local Muslims. A quote from a Muslim academic and former politician described New Zealand as ‘a fair and just society’ with no need for ‘resorting to military and security measures which further alienate people’. This positive close is immediately followed by a list of four local Muslims who have joined (via Australia) or have tempted to join terrorist groups, although one of them claimed to have originally travelled to find a wife. While we could argue that dialogue may have been present in the process of information gathering from Muslim sources, the overall outcome shows otherwise. While Muslim voices are presented to disclose

their fears, desire for social harmony and sense of victimisation, these voices are undermined using irony, repetition of negative attributes and negative content highlights.

Article 5: Cannes' burkini ban is an Isis-like attack on personal liberty (Fairfax Media, 2016)

This political opinion piece against France's burkini ban supports a condescending tone. The Muslim voice is absent although the writer advocates for the burkini as part of democratic rather than autocratic rule. As a country, France is depicted as severely autocratic where 'nothing is allowed until the law permits it' compared to England 'where everything is allowed until the law forbids it' (Samuel, 2016). While the writer extolled the virtues of 'freedoms the West holds dear', the article is littered with ethnocentric perceptions of 'the other' from men 'cutting their beards' to 'women smoking cigarettes and uncovering their faces' as examples of 'control over their own bodies', failing to recognise that those who do not do either are also exercising rights over their bodies. The burkini is viewed as a backward dress code that 'harks back to an age where a woman's worth is measured by her modesty' and where 'the female form is shameful and provocative'. There is no female Muslim voice explaining the rationale for their dress code. While the writer supports freedom of dress in private and state functions, she justifies the removal of 'face-coverings', labelling them 'obstructive'. She also assumes that other types of justice systems are inferior: 'Strong societies cannot permit legal or political systems, such as Sharia courts or caliphates'. The article closes in support of the burkini, as 'one of the most important values of a free society'. This opinion piece promotes the greatness of Western societies as civilised and tolerant. While it champions the rights of 'the other', it also reduces them as a marginalised and inferior group deserving protection and benevolence.

Construction of meaning through images

Spoken and written language, even though it is considered as a primary form of communication, is formed after the act of perception. As noted by Barry (1997), in humans' cognitive development, perception precedes the language. The organisation of meaning and making sense of the world begin by seeing. In time, cultural and environmental factors influence the interpretation of what is seen to form a verbal structure (p. 117). Due to associated meanings images become an influential tool that can subtly, yet intensely, influence perceivers' understanding of life and socio-political events. In journalism, photographs are to support the text with visual evidence and reflect the standpoint of the story. However, photographs are considered secondary to the text and, as a result, the significance of images in constructing meaning is usually underestimated and less developed (MacAuliffe, 2007, p. 31). This section analyses the visual

representation of Islam and the Muslim community in New Zealand media by applying Islamic theory of *Ta'will* (meaning interpretation and intensification) to go beyond the immediate message of the image.

Most current studies on the visual representation of Muslims in Western media are based on the Western framework of semiotics, which attempts to analyse the formation of visual signs and the cultural meanings hidden in these signs (Smith-Shank, 2004). These studies criticise Western media for producing visual codes of negative and stereotypical connotations. Visuals that accompany articles about Muslims often have an emphasis on threat (MacAuliffe, 2007). This study is timely and significant because there is little research on the visual representation of Muslims in New Zealand media, and there is no study that applies Islamic concepts to investigate this area. This analysis aims to initiate and encourage the development of a new model that is based on Islamic knowledge and that encourages a visual communication of Islam and Muslims, which promotes a dialogue across differences.

***Ta'will* and perception as a method for the study of visuals**

For the Persian-Islamic philosopher Mulla Sadra, *Ta'will*³ (interpretation and intensification), is an Islamic concept that encompasses perception. Sense perception, in the Islamic worldview, is considered to be limited to human survival and receives only the necessary information from the world; the rest is filtered out (Moris, 2003). Hence, we cannot perceive the reality of existence beyond our physical needs (Yazdī, 1992). Also, perception tends toward fixity; we assign meanings to forms in order to give them an identification that is separate to our own. In doing so, we select information and construct meaning based on a fragmented set of evidence gathered and interpreted by the mind (Kalin, 2003). In this fragmented view, the self is unable to see the true reality of entities and their interconnection. Because of these limits of perception, Sadra emphasises that one should doubt what is apparent to sense perception.⁴

According to Sadra, despite all the limitations, human perception can be expanded if one questions the reality of what is seen. *Ta'will*, as a method that encourages continuous questioning and doubting of that which is understood by the mind, promotes curiosity and interpretations (Yazdī, 1992, pp. 38-40) that leads to a wider perception to eventually intensify one's being (Rizvi, 2009, p. 44). The more we delve into understanding the reality of the world and its entities through constant doubting and questioning, the more intense and more singular one's being becomes (intensity refers to more or less in quality) (Emadi, 2014).

In this study, *Ta'will* assists in thinking beyond the semiotic understanding of images to become more aware of the socio-political factors contained within the images. Adapting and applying *Ta'will* to the visual representation of Islam in Western media encourages us to question images beyond their building blocks

of visual codes that are isolated from the whole image. Instead, through *Ta 'will*, the visual elements are explored in relation to the underlying events that have led to the production of such an image and its associated meanings.

Unpacking the visuals

The representation of Muslims in New Zealand media centres on particular media frames that in most cases, in the first instance, seem to present a fair image of the community. This section analyses and explores such a presentation to see how these images contribute to a certain understanding of the Muslim community and whether they add to the existing stereotypes of Islam. The study of visuals is categorised into three parts: ‘falsification’, ‘contradicting representation’, and ‘negative representation’.

Falsification

This section looks into two images that abstractly visualise the topic of their articles and they seem to have no negative connotations. However, after considering *Ta 'will*, the lack of cultural sensitivity towards the Muslim community is revealed.

Figure 1 is from an article titled ‘Imams sent to New Zealand to foil radicals’ (2016), from *The New Zealand Herald*. The article is about ‘educated’ Egyptian imams that are going to be sent to New Zealand to ‘promote moderate Islam and tolerance’. The image with the exotic and beautiful Islamic patterns and calming colours can be considered as a peaceful representation of Islam. However, the caption, with terms such as ‘taking control’ and ‘reduce radicalisation’, implies an urgent need to ‘counter jihadism’ by seeking help from imams outside of the Muslim community in New Zealand, although there has not been any incident of extremism in New Zealand.

Beyond the obvious contradiction between the photograph and its caption, the image of the exotic costume and patterns resembles the Western paintings of the Orient in the 18th and 19th centuries by artists such as Paolo Veronese and Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Frederico Bartolini. The East is presented as a mysterious place full of secrets, where there is backward thinking, where the Arabs are lustful and have a dissatisfied sensuality in harems (Needham, 1982). The paintings are overly imaginary because most artists from this time never travelled to the Middle East. Instead, they referred to “travel prints” to achieve a convincing image of the Orient (p. 339). As postcolonial theorist Edward W. Said noted (1979), the Western painters presented pure fantasy and their ideal vision of the Middle East; a vision that the West hoped for, where the Middle East was to be scowled and looked-down upon. The representation of the Orient had very little to do with the real Orient. Said locates Orientalism within the history of imperialism in which the West aimed to understand the ‘other’ in order to control them

Imams sent to New Zealand to foil radicals

5 Apr, 2016 5:00am

4 minutes to read



Egypt's Government is sending Cairo-educated imams to "take control" of New Zealand mosques and Islamic centres in a new drive to reduce radicalisation and counter jihadism. Photo / iStock

Figure 1: 'The image with the exotic and beautiful Islamic patterns and calming colours can be considered as a peaceful representation of Islam. However, the caption, with terms such as "taking control" and "reduce radicalisation", implies an urgent need to "counter jihadism".'

Source: www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11616833

(Said, 1979). Hence, the West produced a body of knowledge about the Orient to serve the Occident (the West). This system of knowledge, called Orientalism, relies on the objectification of the 'other' in order to study them. Hence, Orientalism survives on the study of the 'other' and to create an "ideal other". The Orient continues to be portrayed as a "timeless image" that never changes and is always behind the current time; uncivilized and cruel with mysterious and exotic beauty (Jhally, Smith, Talreja, & Watson, 2014).

The Orientalist tradition that informed the Western paintings of the East has also been informing the current contemporary image making and the media representation of the East. It is not surprising that the photograph from the article (Figure 1) also presents an unidentifiable imam in an exotic costume within an Eastern setting like in 'The Blue Mosque' painting by Jean Leon Gerome (Figure 2). The photograph in the article is evidence of an ongoing 'othering'. Similar



Figure 2: ‘The Orientalist tradition that informed the Western paintings of the East has also been informing the current contemporary image making and the media representation of the East.’

to the painting from 1878 by Gerome, the photograph is a Western fantasy that objectifies the culture and people. This becomes even more evident when we come to realise that the image was selected from a photo website, Istock (see image caption), rather than produced specifically for the article.⁵

Similarly, Figure 3, from the article titled ‘Cannes’ burkini ban is an ISIL-like attack on personal liberty’ (2016), is sourced from another photo website, Getty. The article refers to the burkini as a form of freedom for Muslim women. Apart from the figure in black clothes, the digitally created image does not have any other exotic reference to the Orient (e.g. there is no desert, Islamic architecture, patterns). However, a faceless figure of a woman in water looking towards a calm horizon of the sea makes one wonder if the image was influenced by Surrealist paintings that always carry an element of surprise or of the unexpected within a dreamy setting. The woman covered in black (a common stereotypical representation of Muslim women), unexpectedly placed in this dreamy setting, seems to be another form of a mysterious, fantasy-like representation of and about Muslim people of the Orient, as noted by Said (1979).

Both images indicate carelessness and laziness of the media. Instead of challenging and breaking away from the old form of representation, they consciously or unconsciously continue to contribute to the reproduction of Orientalism.

Cannes' burkini ban is an Isil-like attack on personal liberty

JULIET SAMUEL

Last updated 16:08, August 16 2016



Getty

Burkinis have been banned at Cannes.

In Manjib, Syria, the men are cutting their beards. The women are smoking cigarettes and uncovering their faces. Newly liberated from the rule of Isil, they're expressing the most basic freedom a human can possess: control over their own bodies.

Figure 3: 'A faceless figure of a woman in water looking towards a calm horizon of the sea makes one wonder if the image was influenced by Surrealist paintings that always carry an element of surprise or of the unexpected within a dreamy setting.'

Source: www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/fashion/83234432/cannes-burkini-ban-is-an-isillike-attack-on-personal-liberty

Contradicted representation

The images studied in this section demonstrate a better attempt to represent members of the Muslim community in a fairer manner. However, subtle but significant decisions in the making of the image, such as the choice of visual composition, construct profound meanings that, in an indirect manner, influence the public's view of Muslims.

The article titled 'Lifting the veil on the life of Muslim women in NZ' (2014), from *The New Zealand Herald*, demonstrates a fair attempt to communicate the difficulties Muslim women face in a Western country (Figures 4, 5). Instead of stereotyping the hijab, the mid-shot permits a close enough proximity to see the

Lifting the veil on the life of Muslim women in NZ

23 Jan, 2014 5:30am

🕒 12 minutes to read



Sahar Farhat (left), Alena Katkova and Rawand Shiblaq feel they have been shown respect for wearing the hijab. Photo / Greg Bowker

Figure 4: 'A fair attempt to communicate the difficulties Muslim women face in a Western country.'

Source: www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11190464

joyful expression on the women's faces with a body language that indicates their close sense of connection to each other. The article includes close-up shots of each individual woman with a simple background. A close-up framing captures each individual's character and facilitates a level of encounter between each woman and the reader, creating what is considered as a 'one-on-one relationship' (Barry, 1997, p. 137).

A close-up shot attempts to show the subjects beyond the perceived stereotype by focusing on their individuality. However, the close-up shot also isolates and separates the subject from its environment. When looking at something too closely, our vision is limited and distorted. In the context of cinema, film theorist, Laura U. Marks (2002, pp. 1-22), formulates a concept of 'haptic visuality', which refers to a manner of viewing that draws on all sense perceptions for an embodied experience of the visual. In haptic visuality, one perceives so closely that the lack of distinction in the image activates bodily senses. This can be seen



Figure 5: 'The article includes close-up shots of each individual woman with a simple background.'

in extreme close-up shots when the close proximity between the camera and the subject asks for an experience of the image rather than only a view of it. Optic visuality, on the other hand, is looking at something with enough distance to understand the relations. Although they are different, haptic and optic visuality exist on opposite ends of the same spectrum; each one creates different meanings but they complement each other.

Borrowing Marks' (2002) terms, close-up shots and wide shots can be considered in terms of haptic and optic.⁶ Although in media news coverage close-ups are used differently to cinema, they still use personal proximity to emphasise emotion and experience. A wide shot, on the other hand, highlights the relation amongst different elements within a space. An individual is no longer emphasised, as in a close-up, instead, connections and relations between the surrounding elements becomes significant. As discussed by Barry (1997), one of the significant aspects of perception is its ability to structure mental connections amongst entities and make sense out of our relation to the environment. While verbal language achieves its logic from a linear structure, perceptual logic is immediate and experiential. Images grounded in perceptual logic have a direct and immediate influence on viewers. As a result, if a specific element, such as a close-up, is always used in different but similar contexts, in time, it forms a cultural code that eventually results in cultural conditioning.

Cultural meanings and codes are produced through the repetition of the same kind of image. By repeating images with certain cultural codes in different contexts, the media portrays and implants a meaning for that image (Smith-Shank, 2004), which eventually puts an end to the possibility of interpretation that the theory of *Ta'will* encourages. One sees an image and instantly gives it a certain definition (an imposition by mainstream media). An image of a woman wearing a hijab is an example of a visual code or signifier that contains cultural meaning. One sees it and instantly understands it as a representation of Islam (Youssef –Zayzafoon, 2005). The signifier (cultural meaning) of Islam is in the image, however, depending on *how* that particular image is shown, the associated meanings can differ slightly.

Although close-up shots of members of the Muslim community, mainly women, appreciate and celebrate their individuality, the framing also connotes isolation and separation. It not only isolates and separates them from the society, it also dehumanises them, if all we see is always only them. On the other hand, an optic visuality that shows them as part of the society could normalise their presence. In this case, diverse uses of haptic and optic visuality are essential to provide both close encounters, as well as a distanced view that incorporates them as part of a whole, the society. Hence, an image cannot become an icon that carries a particular meaning if it varies depending on each individual case and situation.

Negative representation

When meaning is attached to an image and when an image becomes an icon, there is no place for interpretation. Lack of interpretation means limited perception, which prevents one from questioning what is seen in order to explore the possibilities and the reality of the perceived image. This eventually closes the potential for dialogue; if the image or event is already judged, the potential for dialogue is likely to vanish. This is present in images from two articles, “Fears of terror in our own backyard” (2014), and “Jihadi bride’s fears over Kiwi women” (2016), from the New Zealand Herald. Both articles use the stereotypical image of Muslim men and terror to bring across meanings of terrorism and fear.

The first article is about a Muslim Sheikh who has been accused of promoting Jihadist ideology and ‘banned’ from Avondale Islamic Centre in Auckland. The image used in the article (Figure 6) carries a double meaning. On one hand the Sheikh with a long beard in a white robe is a familiar figure that is associated with Muslims. This common figure almost always signifies aggression and terror associated with the Islamic religion. It is not hard to find similar images of people that are introduced as terrorists in Hollywood movies and Western



Figure 6: ‘The image used in the article about a Muslim Sheikh carries a double meaning.’
www.stuff.co.nz/national/10606918/Fears-of-terror-in-our-own-backyard

media. On the other hand, the image shows a full-shot of an old-aged man. His position in the centre of the shot gives him power and stability. The surrounding environment (backyard of a humble-looking neighbourhood with a child in the background) suggests an ordinary man with an ordinary life. One wonders if this man could be a terrorist. However, because of the stereotypical image of terrorists as Arab men in white robes, the image is more likely to be interpreted negatively and encourage a sense of fear that is based on distrust.

The image of the second article (Figure 7) is a negative representation of Islam. It shows a male figure in black clothing with a covered face. The man is holding a gun in one hand and a flag of the Islamic state, ISIS, in the other. The flag states the testimony of Islam, and contains words such as Allah, and Prophet Muhammad. The scary and mysterious figure of the man with a gun and a black flag can hardly be interpreted as anything other than Islam and violence, where the two words become equal.

These images present the demonisation of Islam in the media. The first image achieves this by creating an ambiguous message, which is insecurity and fear of a neighbour, while the second image is very clear and direct in its negative message. One refers to the *possible* terrorist that *could* be your neighbour, while the other can be clearly identified as an international terrorist. Even though the first image is implicitly negative, its effect is far greater than the second image as it is implanting the seed of fear through its double meaning (or ambiguity), which promotes 'Islamophobia'.

According to Said (1979), Islam is a useful foreign enemy to turn attention away from internal issues in the Western societies, mainly in the United States. As a result, the human quality of Muslim people is hardly found in media representation.

Friday, 8 January 2016

'Jihadi bride' fears over Kiwi women

News > National

An increasing number of New Zealand women are heading to Iraq and Syria, SIS director Rebecca Kitteridge told the intelligence and security committee today at Parliament.

But she did not know whether they were going as "jihadi brides", to fight themselves or to support Isis fighters.

"What has changed over the last year is that the issue of New Zealand women travelling to Iraq and Syria wasn't something we have seen previously or been aware of previously," she said.

Asked by Prime Minister John Key if they were "jihadi brides" she said: "Presumably. It is difficult to see what they do when they go. We definitely have intelligence that they went. Whether they are going to fight or whether they are going to support other fighters is not clear but it is a real concern that they would go at all."



A member loyal to Islamic State waves the group's flag in Raqqa, Syria. Photo by Reuters

Figure 7: 'The image of the second article is a negative representation of Islam. It shows a male figure in black clothing with a covered face. The man is holding a gun in one hand and a flag of the Islamic state, ISIS, in the other.'

www.odt.co.nz/news/national/jihadi-bride-fears-over-kiwi-women

Instead, there are mindless and impulsive images of terror attached to stereotypical images of Muslims. These images are seen at different levels in Western media, from the news to Hollywood films, such as *The Shaykh Steps Out* (1937), *Arabian Nights* (1942), *Ambassador in Hostage* (1986, and *Mummy Returns* (2001). Shaheen (2003), who has documented and studied over 900 Hollywood films, argues that almost every feature American film ever produced systematically portrays Arabs/Muslims as the threatening ‘other’ that looks and lives differently.⁷ The exotic magical quality of the East is shown to contain forms of barbarism. Hence, Islam is portrayed as something to be feared and that Muslims only understand the language of force, and, therefore, should be either confined or destroyed.

To summarise, there are clear patterns of falsification, contradiction and negative representation in the use of visuals. Firstly, while many of the visuals seem to explicitly illustrate either a positive or a balanced view of Islam in New Zealand society, there exists an underpinning negativity. Secondly, stereotypical elements are always present in the images. And lastly, the composition and visual elements of the image are designed in a manner that conforms to a Western audience’s expectations, further reinforcing stereotypes.

Conclusion

The treatment of Islam by Western journalism can be traced to a past Anglocentric conceptualisation of the Orientals as exotic, depraved and decadent (Said, 1979). This negative view of the unfamiliar is described in intercultural studies as a defensive form of ethnocentrism and a way of ‘othering’ people considered as the out-group. A dominant group defends their own culture as superior by undermining the out-group who is diminished in value, silenced and marginalised. Physical, psychological and emotional abuses become normalised and are persistently inflicted on the out-group.

Historically, devaluation of the ‘other’ was experienced by colonised indigenous people of various nations; the Aboriginal Australians, the Māori in New Zealand and the indigenous natives of Canada and the United States. The superior sense of race held by Colonialists was supported by the ‘objective’ scientific concept of Eugenics. It supports racial superiority through subjugation and ill-treatment, where one dominant group believes itself to be the best and must therefore maintain racial purity and the expansion of one ethnicity or cease to exist because of intercultural mixing. Such ideology involves the consistent destruction of the ‘other’ and hits at the core of human existence which is the right to dignity and social value. The othering of Mexicans, Blacks, and Muslims in the United States, the Rohingya genocide and the ill-treatment of Palestinians are new forms of imperialism. Out-groups are framed as homogenous, alien, barbaric and thus require control for society to attain a civilised existence. This is apparent in negative news stories where the Muslim voices were manipulated

or missing. It is also evident in the images of the faceless and distant Muslims, either in an explicitly violent setting, wielding paraphernalia or alone and separated from a visible background.

Ironically, even in media studies on Islam, Islamic theories are missing. This article's introduction of theoretical lenses based on Islamic knowledge is a step towards filling this gap. If we accept that human dignity and respect are essential civil liberties, then media needs to be aware of their misrepresentations and improve their practice. If the 'other' is framed according to the interpretation of the dominant culture, dialogue is absent and mutual understanding can hardly be achieved.

As research shows, journalists generally lack knowledge about Islam and perpetuate the negative stereotypes mindlessly. However, stories with a range of Muslim voices indicate some level of dialogic exchange and underscore the writers' ethical stance to interculturally engage 'the other'. According to the Council of Europe (n.d.),

Intercultural dialogue is an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other's global perception.

The media can rectify their misrepresentations of Muslims by adopting intercultural dialogue. The outcome would present a holistic story that uses the voices of those involved respectfully. This work is timely not only because there appears to be a growing misconceived hatred for a faith supported by 1.5 billion of the world's population, but more importantly, this destructive trend is promoted by the media, consciously or not, and has the potential to ultimately cause an unnecessary and irreparable rift in civil society.

Notes

1. Muslims are diverse. In this article, "Muslim" refers to the identity that is typically represented in the media, and not an acknowledgement of a presumed homogeneity.

2. This was necessary to meet the journal's word limit. For the other analyses, please contact the authors.

3. It is important to note that Sadra is a Shia Muslim whose philosophy was influenced by previous Eastern thinkers such as Persian philosophers Ali Ibn Sina (980-1037 CE) and Shahāb ad-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154-1191). *Ta'will*, literally means 'bringing back to the root', is part of a hermeneutical method to understand the inner meaning of the Qur'an (Hixon & Douglas-Klotz, 2003). It is understood that the Quran has many layers of hidden meaning that cannot be understood by ordinary people. This hidden meaning can only be revealed to those who achieve higher-levels of perfection. *Ta'will* is used to understand meanings beyond the apparent and to the root of the text.

4. The Real, for Sadra, is equal to the Divine Being that is present within every existing entity, but perception is incapable of comprehending the Divine presence in entities (Jambet, 2006, p. 119).

5. While using the stock photo is a common practice in journalism, in this case, the chosen picture relies on and reinforces the existing stereotype image of the Orient. Similar to early orientalist paintings, this image is selected based on an assumed understanding of the East.
6. It is important to note that for the purpose of this article Marks' theory of haptic and optic visibility has been simplified.
7. It should be noted that, as part of the process of othering, Hollywood generalises Muslims as Arabs who are always from the Middle East. Needless to say, Muslims come from broad backgrounds and the region of Middle East also consists of non-Arabs. The generalisation of the region and its people serve a Western approach to dehumanise a group of people based on their race and religion.

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