Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism

reporting arabic and muslim people
in sydney newspapers

Peter Manning

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# Distortions of imperialism afflict media view of Islam

**Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism:**
**Reporting Arabic and Muslim People**
**in Sydney newspapers,** by Peter
Manning. Sydney: ACIJ, 2004. 48 pp.
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FOR JOURNALISTS in New Zealand bemused by the apparent paranoia in Australia over the issue of 'boat people' in the wake of the international incident on the high seas off the northwestern coast involving the Norwegian freighter *Tampa,* Peter Manning's damning monograph clears much of the fog. Through two years of textual analysis, he has laid bare how Australia's discourse of fear came to be focused on some 4000 people on board leaky boats, seeking asylum without visas.

Manning, an adjunct professor in journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney, and former head of news and current affairs at ABC TV, researched two years of published stories in the two major morning newspapers in Australia's largest city, Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* and *The Sydney Morning Herald.*

Both papers have proud records: The tabloid *Daily Telegraph* has been owned by two of Australia's leading media families in its 124-year history – the Packers and now Murdochs.

And the *Sydney Morning Herald*, first published in 1841, regards itself as a quality broadsheet comparable in status to the London *Times*.

Sydney was chosen as the subject for research because more than two-thirds of the country's Arabic-speaking community – some 142,000 people – live in this city.

Manning employed two approaches for his methodology. Firstly, he used QSR NU*DIST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data* Indexing Searching and Theorising) qualitative data analysis software to determine correlations based on the data.

The second approach was a literary analysis of selected articles based on themes produced by the NUD*IST from the project's database of 12,000 or more articles.

Both approaches relied on a global newspaper database system, LexisNexis.

The research was defined by a series of keywords covering major countries in the Middle East with predominant Arab populations, or those not in the Middle East but having predominant Muslim populations (such as Indonesia).

Also considered were events and people over the two-year period that were likely to have featured in news pages and may have had Arab and/or Muslim connotations.

Themes included reporting the second Palestine-Israel intifada, the controversial Lebanese rape gang trials in Sydney's south-western suburbs, the surge in asylum seekers, the September 11 attack, and general references to Muslim Arabs in the 2001 federal election.

The monograph's title is drawn from sheep farmer imagery referring to 'dog whistle' journalism and in particular to a quote drawn from the *Sydney Morning Herald* while discussing the *Tampa* affair:

> Media images were manipulated by the Government to make asylum seekers seem a threat, rather than a tragedy. It was a classic example of what they call 'dog whistle' politics, where a subliminal message, not literally apparent in the words used, is heard by sections of the community (cited by Manning, 2004: 1).

Manning also draws on the ideas of Edward Said, a Palestinian American literary scholar (who unfortunately died last year), and his seminal works *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*. Said exposed the roots of Western prejudice towards 'the Orient' and the view that the Arab and Muslim have 'long been ogres to a Christian and post-Christian West'.

Manning says a close textual reading reveals some clear patterns. Arabs and Muslims – and Palestinians in particular – are 'seen as violent to the point of terrorism'.

Israel, the US and Australia – 'us', as Manning suggests – are 'seen under attack from such people' and they are regarded as both an external and internal threat.

'Their violence is portrayed as without reason, humanity of compassion for its victims,' writes Manning.

'It is a portrait of deep and sustained fear. It is also a portrait of an Australian orientalism that has been successfully transplanted and developed on Antipodean shores' (p 45).

In a later article (2004), Manning described the *Herald's* depiction of Palestinians as 'comprehensively simplistic, naive and offensive'. While the *Telegraph* was less 'one-eyed', on the gang rapes and asylum seekers it was 'more strident and virulent'.

The fact that this study suggests Sydney journalism, in both foreign and domestic reporting, has picked up the 'imperial inheritance with full force' is perhaps not too surprising (p 44).

But the degree of starkness in the distortions and stereotypes of representations of Arabic and Muslim people is undoubtedly fertile ground for challenge to the status quo.

And it would be interesting to see similar media research replicated in New Zealand. In view of the Ahmed Zaoui affair (see p 184) and attitudes over the US occupation of Iraq, it would hardly be a surprise if findings in Auckland are actually worse.

**References**

Manning, Peter (2004). Typecasting the Arabs. *The Walkley Magazine*, Issue 26, April/May, pp 18-19.

Said, Edward (1995). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.

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# Bougainville's inspiring tribute to survival by women of peace

**... as Mothers of the Land: The birth of the Bougainville Women for Peace and *Freedom*, edited by Josephine Tankunani Sirivi and Marilyn Taleo Havini. Canberra: Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, 2004. ISBN 1 74076 043 3**

AS A journalist, I covered the early part of the Bougainville war. In October 1989, while freelancing, I was dispatched by *Pacific Islands Monthly* and other media to Arawa to report reflectively on the conflict one year on after it had started.

This was at a time when Joseph Kabui was still premier of the North Solomons province (now he is president of the assembly) and there was still hope that the struggle over the giant Panguna copper mine and the right to self-determination would be resolved.